

JOHN UPDIKE

ALWAYS
LOOKING



Essays on Art



JOHN UPDIKE

Always Looking

ESSAYS ON ART

Edited by Christopher Carduff



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Excerpts from “The Clarity of Things” were published in *The New York Review of Books* and *Humanities* magazine. The full text of this lecture made reference to sixty-four images projected onscreen while the author spoke; it has been slightly abridged by Christopher Carduff for its appearance here.

The remaining pieces were published, in somewhat different form and sometimes under different titles, in *The New York Review of Books* or *The New Republic*. These pieces were revised by the author for eventual book publication and deposited at Houghton Library, Harvard University, in December 2008, the month before his death. They are printed here in much the form that John Updike left them, and under his preferred titles.

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Cover image: John Updike, in 1989, looking at three paintings by Henri Matisse in the Florence May Schoenborn Gallery, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (from left to right: *View of Notre Dame*, 1914; *Moroccan Garden*, 1912; *Goldfish and Sculpture*, 1912). Photograph © 2012 by Benno Friedman

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The question is not what you look at—
but how you look & whether you see.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU,
Journal, August 5, 1851

“What’s this?”

“What’s what?”

“Why, *look*.”

—JOHN UPDIKE, *The Poorhouse Fair*

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Editor's Note

Always Looking was conceived by Judith Jones of Alfred A. Knopf as a posthumous companion to John Updike's previous collections of art writings, *Just Looking* (1989) and *Still Looking* (2005). Martha Updike, John's wife and literary executor, invited me to put together the book, which I edited in tandem with *Higher Gossip*, a more various collection of Updike's essays and criticism published by Knopf in 2011. Thank you, Judith and Martha, for sponsoring this final set of illustrated "gallery tours," which I've arranged as a highly selective survey of the last two hundred years of Western art, a master class in appreciation conducted from an unabashedly American perspective.

Of the thirteen exhibition reviews gathered here, ten first appeared in *The New York Review of Books* between 1990 and 2007. The reviews of Monet, Miró, and Magritte appeared in *The New Republic* between 1990 and 1993. "Pictures and Words" was published, as "A Bookish Boy," in *Life*, October 1990. "A Case of Monumentality" was written, at the invitation of Edward Hirsch, for *Transforming Vision* (Bulfinch Press, 1994), a volume of essays and poems inspired by works in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Updike delivered "The Clarity of Things," the thirty-seventh annual Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, at the Warner Theatre, in Washington, D.C., on May 22, 2008. Excerpts were published in *The New York Review of Books* and in *Humanities*, the magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Many thanks to my collaborators at Knopf, Peter A. Andersen, Deborah Garrison, Ken Schneider, and Caroline Zancan. I am deeply indebted to Sarah Almond, who, in securing rights to reproduce the illustrations for this volume, was less a permissions editor than a full partner in bookmaking.

Christopher Carduff
November 2011



LINDA GRACE HOYER UPDIKE *John Updike*, 1941 Gelatin silver print, 5 × 3¹/₁₆"
John H. Updike Literary Trust ([Illustration Credit fm2.1](#))

Preface: Pictures and Words

MY MOTHER took this photograph, and dated it precisely on the back: September 21, 1941. I was, therefore, nine years, six months, and three days old. Consulting the perpetual calendar, I find that the date fell, as I suspected, on a Sunday; my little suit coat, my solid laced shoes, and a sabbath gleam in the dappled sunshine suggest a day apart. No amount of peering, even with a magnifying glass, at the photograph revives in me any memory-sensation of the moment that has been preserved, but the site is very familiar. It was one of my favorite places in the world: the side porch of the house at 117 Philadelphia Avenue, in Shillington, Pennsylvania. The house belonged to my maternal grandparents; due to the exigencies of the Depression my parents and I lived there as well. On this long side porch, half of whose length stretches out of sight to my right, I would play by myself or with others—setting up grocery stores out of orange crates and crayoned paper fruit, making cozy houses out of overturned wicker porch furniture. A grape arbor extended outward from the porch roof, throwing its dazzling dapple down upon the steps and a brick patio where ants busily came and went between the cracks. The grapevine's tendrils curled with such intricacy that I imagined they would spell the entire alphabet if I looked hard enough.

The door behind me leads into our kitchen, with its linoleum floor and wooden icebox and soapy-smelling stone sink. The kitchen smelled of vanilla, cinnamon, and shredded coconut in its glass-fronted cabinets, and of the oilcloth on the little table where we ate, I seated at a corner that prodded me in the stomach. On those days when my mother and grandmother canned, putting up peaches and pears and tomatoes in Mason jars, there was a majestic amount of steam in the kitchen, and a surplus of those fascinating little sealing rings of red rubber. These rings, and clothespins, and spools depleted of thread were common household items in that homely pre-war world, and thriftily became toys.

The broom rack is a period detail, and another broom seems to peek in at the left; sweeping was a constant rite of summer, as was fly-swatting, with its similarly shaped implement. At the end of the porch, against the radiant foliage of our back yard, sits a wire lawn-chair that had a curious destiny. When we moved, in 1945, from this house to a smaller house in the country, the wire chair, a greenish blue in color, somehow came indoors, and joined our living-room furniture. A cushion did not appreciably disguise or soften its metal mesh. Its springy seat rebounded into convexity, when you stood up, with an audible snap.



WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS *Mickey Mouse in "The Treasure Hunt,"* 1941 3½ × 4 × 1¼" Whitman Publishing Co., Racine, Wisconsin ([Illustration Credit prf.1](#))

The chair eventually migrated to our barn, and I did not notice it there last fall, when, more than forty-eight years after she took this picture, my mother died, and I surveyed my inheritance. My mother's old camera had also vanished. The technical excellence of this photograph, there in the difficult dapple, testifies to my mother's skill as she lovingly sought to capture her only child. The camera was an oblong old Kodak with a pebbly black leather skin, an unfolding black bellows, and a broken viewfinder. She would judge the exposure by looking at the sky and determine the focus by pacing off the distance and returning to her photographer's spot. Here she managed a focus so sharp that one can not only read the words MICKEY MOUSE on the cover of the Big Little Book but also the subtitle THE TREASURE HUNT and see that Mickey is wearing a pith helmet.

How I did love Big Little Books! They were chunky little volumes sold for ten cents, made of single panels from a comic strip opposite a short page of narrative text. My transition from wanting to be a cartoonist to wanting to be a writer may have come about through that friendly opposition, that even-handed pairing, of pictures and words. The colorful crispness of the fat flat Big Little Book spines stacked on my bedroom shelf, and on the counters of the Woolworth's and McCrory's where, on Saturday mornings, I went with my hoarded dimes to enlarge my collection, deepened my love of all books and my sense that, whatever else it may be, a book is a manufactured item, which should be amusing to look at and pleasant to hold.



Mickey Was Glad to Be Home

MICKEY MOUSE IN THE TREASURE HUNT

CHAPTER I

CAPTAIN CHURCHMOUSE'S PLAN

"Boy, it seems good to be home again!" Mickey Mouse cried as he entered his own front door on his return from his thrilling adventure on the Island in the Sky. "I feel like I'd been gone a year! An' could I use some sleep? I'm gonna go to bed an' stay there for a

WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS *Mickey Mouse in "The Treasure Hunt,"* 1941 3½ × 4 × 1¼" Whitman Publishing Co., Racine, Wisconsin ([Illustration Credit prf.2](#))

An uncanny stillness reigns between the boy's face, with its tiny smile and many freckles, and the pages of the open book. His hands, in sunlight, look posed, and indeed a posed quality formalizes the whole. This quality strikes me now as poignant and tender. My mother was so encouraging of my childish artistic interests, so hopeful for me. Here she seems, out of sheer hopes for the future, to have carefully arranged and taken the first picture of me suitable for use on the back of a book jacket—the Author in Early Bud, at work in his outdoor study.



JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY *Paul Revere*, 1768 Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 28 $\frac{1}{2}$ " Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Joseph W. Revere, William B. Revere, and Edward H. R. Revere, 30.781 ([Illustration Credit 1.0](#))

“The Clarity of Things”

THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT for the Humanities, together with the American Library Association, has launched in this year of 2008 a program that will supply classrooms and public libraries with reproductions of significant American art, one example on each side of twenty high-quality posters, forty examples in all, under the overall title *Picturing America*. It was my idea, invited by the Endowment to give the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, to use some of these forty works, with others, to pose the question “What is American about American art?” The question has often arisen; it was asked in almost these exact same words in 1958, by Lloyd Goodrich, then the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. His essay was titled “What Is American in American Art?” and began:

One of the most American traits is our urge to define what is American. This search for a self-image is a result of our relative youth as a civilization, our years of partial dependence on Europe. But it is also a vital part of the process of growth.

My impression is that inquiries into an essential Americanness are less fashionable than they were fifty years ago, since they inevitably gravitate, in this age of diversity and historical revision, to that least hip of demographic groups, white Protestant males of Northern European descent. These thin-lipped patriarchal persons figure, as founding Puritans or Founding Fathers, as Western pioneers or industrial magnates, at every juncture of traditional history books, and our diverse, eclectic, skeptical present population may have heard quite enough about them.

Yet my skimming survey of our sensitively diverse set of forty artworks cannot avoid these primal Americans. Let us begin with the first great painter cast up by our art-sparse, undercivilized, eastern-coastal New World, a young man as precocious as he was assiduous, John Singleton Copley. Born in 1738 of Irish immigrants on Boston’s Long Wharf, his childhood marred by his

father's early death and then, when he was thirteen, by that of his stepfather, the English artist and engraver Peter Pelham, Copley was all his life a striver and, with what I would like to think of as a typically American trait, a learner.



COPLEY *Charles Pelham*, c. 1753–54 Oil on canvas, 36 × 28" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 1.1](#))

Colonial Boston, a town of fewer than sixteen thousand, accounted for 40 percent of the colonies' shipping; it abounded in shops and skilled craftsmen but was devoid of art schools and museums; European art entered its homes, if at all, in the form of fine consumer goods and inadequate monochrome prints. Copley was to complain in letters that his fellow colonials "generally regard [painting] no more than any other usefull trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter, tailor, or shew [shoe] maker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the World," and that his native land offered him "neither precept, example, nor

Models.” Peter Pelham was proficient in the art of mezzotint, and Copley’s first known work, done when the boy was fifteen, skillfully imposed the head of one clergyman, the Reverend William Welsted, upon the torso of a portrait print his stepfather had executed of another, the Reverend William Cooper.

Copley’s oil portrait of his stepbrother, Charles Pelham, executed a year or so later, is a typical stiff portrait of the period, with a totally indecisive background and a tabletop in odd perspective, yet with a pleasing care in such details as the pen and the vest and an arresting liveliness to the young subject’s glance. By 1756, the teen-age artist attempted, in the portrait of Ann Tyng, a nearly full-length female figure, a landscaped background, and an apparatus of pastoral conceit; by the next year, in that of the aristocratic Theodore Atkinson, Jr., who still wears a wary stiffness in the pose and expression, the painter achieved a wonderful virtuosic realism in the white silk waistcoat embroidered with silver thread.

A canvas of Epes Sargent, the seventy-year-old owner of half of Gloucester, shows a textural brilliance of another sort, in the thoughtful aged face and the puffy, wrinkled hand set off against a coat of plain gray broadcloth. The painter’s voracious eye even notes the little snowfall on Sargent’s shoulder from his powdered wig. By the year of this painting, Copley, not yet thirty, was already recognized as a worker of visual miracles, the supreme portraitist not only in New England but in all the colonies, combining a preternatural skill in mimicking fabrics—as marvellous in pastel, as we see in his rendering of the merchant prince Jonathan Jackson and his blue-green silk morning coat, as in oil—with an increasing power of conveying the inner life behind the faces of his New World aristocrats. For instance, in the portrait of Mrs. James Warren, née Mercy Otis, a colonial rarity, a female intellectual, poet, and future playwright and historian, her facial expression is as complex as the folds and lace trimmings of her voluminous blue satin dress, painted when Copley was only twenty-five.



COPLEY *Epes Sargent*, c. 1760 Oil on canvas, $49\frac{7}{8} \times 40\frac{1}{16}$ " National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Avalon Foundation, 159.4.1 ([Illustration Credit 1.3](#))



COPLEY *Mrs. James Warren (Mercy Otis)*, c. 1763 Oil on canvas, $49\frac{5}{8} \times 39\frac{1}{2}$ "
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of Winslow Warren, 31.212 ([Illustration Credit 1.2](#))

The Copley example chosen by the *Picturing America* series is his 1768 portrait of a successful Boston silversmith, Paul Revere, whose name, thanks to an 1861 poem by Longfellow, would come to reverberate in the legend of the American Revolution. It is Copley's only portrait of a craftsman in shirtsleeves, and the painting itself shows some merely craftsmanly qualities. The shirt is splendid, but the hand on the chin appears too big for the face, and the reflection of the fingers of the other in the silver of the

teapot seems surreally artful. Whatever Revere is thinking about, it is most probably not the midnight ride he will undertake in seven years' time but the job he will undertake tomorrow morning, its meticulous graving and polishing.

This painting, and one several years later of the rising firebrand Samuel Adams, might lead one to associate Copley with the colonies' cause of independence, but in fact he married the daughter of Richard Clarke, principal agent for the British East India Company; it was Clarke's tea, largely, that was dumped into Boston Harbor by revolutionaries painted as Mohawk Indians. In the coming crunch, Clarke was a Tory, and by 1776 Copley had settled with his wife, children, and father-in-law in London's Leicester Square. But, for a decade before this, Copley had been seeking to make his painting more English. He wrote in a letter of yearning "to acquire that bold free and gracefull stile of Painting that will, if ever, come much slower from the mere dictates of Nature, which has hither too been my only instructor."

In 1765, seeking better instruction, he submitted a painting of his half-brother Henry Pelham, titled *Boy with a Squirrel*, to the 1766 exhibition of the Society of Artists in London. His friend Captain R. G. Bruce, who had carried the canvas to England, sent back the approbation of Joshua Reynolds, the leading British portraitist of the day and soon to be the first president of the Royal Academy. In Bruce's paraphrase, Reynolds said, "Considering the Dissadvantages ... you had laboured under, that *it was a very wonderfull Performance*" despite "a little Hardness in the Drawing, Coldness in the Shades, An over minuteness."

The same mail brought Copley word from Pennsylvania-born Benjamin West, who in three years of London residence had apparently mastered English artistic style and manners. West wrote of "the great Honour the Picture has gaind you," though he and some fellow artists had found fault with it as "being to[o] liney, which was judged to have arose from there being so much neetness in the lines." Reynolds, by way of Bruce, encouraged Copley to come to England "before your Manner and Taste were corrupted or fixed by working in your little way at Boston," and the Society of Artists elected him a fellow on the strength of the "liney" canvas; the contemporary art authority John Wilmerding points out that it was the "first major work painted by an American artist for himself, rather than on commission, and it

also became the first American picture to be exhibited abroad.” Copley, Tory or not, was the George Washington of American art, and, rather disconcertingly, he knew it, writing his half-brother in 1775 from England’s shores, “It is a pleasing reflection that I shall stand amongst the first of the artists that shall have led that Country to the Knowledge and cultivation of the fine Arts.”



COPLEY *Boy with a Squirrel* (Henry Pelham), 1765 Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ "
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of the artist's great-granddaughter, 1978.297
([Illustration Credit 1.4](#))

This picture's transatlantic intentions give it a schizophrenic quality: the mahogany tabletop, the water glass, gold chain, and

the tiny pet flying squirrel all have a dry minuteness, but the subject's face, unlike that of Copley's usual hard-faced colonials, is creamy, dreamy, and in romantic profile. Copley's customers for portraits among the colonial gentry put up with an absence of flattery, a refusal to glamorize, that British sitters of comparable status might not have accepted; even here, Copley's warts-and-all portrait policy permanized in paint his half-brother's oddly folded ear, as well as, elsewhere, Nathaniel Allen's hairy moles and Miles Sherbrook's acne scars.

Copley's next submission to the Society of Artists, for the 1767 exhibition, was titled *Young Lady with a Bird and Dog*. This time, Benjamin West complained that the girl looked "disagreeable," and conveyed Reynolds's opinion that

Each Part of the Picture [is] Equell in Strenght of Coulering and finishing,
Each Making to[o] much a Picture of its silf, without the Due
Subordanation to the Principle Parts, viz they head and hands.

What Reynolds meant is shown by his own portrait of Horace Walpole. Here light is sharply focused on the head and one hand. Incidental details are confined to papers, for Walpole is a writer, acting out his role on a minimalist stage. In Reynolds's more elaborate portrait of Warren Hastings, the first governor general of India, the proficiently painted details of clothing and furniture do not usurp attention from the casually posed nobleman and agent of empire, but frame him, in his relaxed dignity; he has a good opinion of himself, and the portrait agrees.



SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS *Horace Walpole*, 1756 Oil on canvas, 50½ × 40½" National Portrait Gallery, London ([Illustration Credit 1.5](#))



REYNOLDS *Warren Hastings*, 1767–68 Oil on canvas, 49¾ × 39¾" National Portrait Gallery, London ([Illustration Credit 1.6](#))

The confident theatricality of English portraits, when Copley attempts it, seems to embarrass his down-to-earth colonial subjects, and turns their expressions ironical; see, for example, Sylvester Gardiner's in his 1772 portrait. If their poses are stiff, it is an honest wooden stiffness; in Copley's paintings of English gentry, the stiffness is burnished to a metallic lustre, and rings hollow. Even in his most admired and ambitious English painting, *The Death of Major Peirson*—a historical tableau in the approved Grand Style, completed in 1784—the central pictorial incident,

with its single drop-shaped drop of blood, feels staged to the point of farce. And the dying hero's flowing hair, and the spruce details of the uniforms crowding around him, seem, well, "liney."

What did Benjamin West mean by this word? A line is a child's first instrument of depiction, the boundary where one thing ends and another begins. The primitive artist is more concerned with what things *are* than what they look like to the eye's camera. Lines serve the facts. Folk art tends to be "liney," as we can see in two American portraits done well before Copley: one of the centenarian Anne Dison, of Boston; the other of the eighteen-year-old Lavinia Van Vechten, of Catskill, New York. Such portraits, executed as a "useful trade" like sign painting and printmaking, were the sole genre of high art widely practiced in America before the nineteenth century brought in Romantic landscapes. They share a resolute attempt at likeness and an honest notation of such details as fabric patterns, but lack a convincing atmosphere and a third dimension; they are, as it were, two-and-a-half-dimensional, and so was Copley's early work. The conventions of illusionistic painting, providing through tint and brushwork the sense of recession in space and of enclosing atmosphere, are not demanded by every culture. In the art-sparse, mercantile world of the American colonies, Copley's lavish literalism must have seemed fair dealing, a heaping measure of value paid in shimmering textures and scrupulously fine detail. "Over minuteness" could scarcely exist, as it did not exist for Holbein or Jan van Eyck.



ANONYMOUS *Mrs. William Pollard (Anne Dison)*, 1721 Oil on canvas, $27\frac{3}{4} \times 22\frac{3}{4}$ "
Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston ([Illustration Credit 1.7](#))



ATTRIBUTED TO NEHEMIAH PARTRIDGE *Lavinia Van Vechten*, 1720 Oil on canvas, 40¼
× 34½" Brooklyn Museum. Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 43.46 ([Illustration Credit](#)
[1.8](#))



COPLEY *Portrait of the Artist*, 1769 Pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 17½ × 23¾" Winterthur Museum, Delaware. Gift of Henry Francis du Pont, 1957.1127 ([Illustration Credit 1.9](#))



COPLEY *Portrait of the Artist*, 1780–84 Oil on canvas, diameter 18" National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, NPG.77.22 ([Illustration Credit 1.10](#))

In the wake of the great Copley retrospective in Boston in 1966, the critic Barbara Novak ascribed Copley's sensibility not to any artistic predecessor but to a "conceptual bias" present in Puritanism. Jonathan Edwards wrote of "the clarity of 'things,' " of things as the mediators between words and ideas, between empirical and conceptual experience. "The manifestations God makes of Himself in His works," Edwards wrote, "are the principal manifestations of His perfections, and the declaration and teachings of His word are to lead to these." The first great painter of American landscapes, Thomas Cole, who also perpetrated a number of religious pictures and large allegorical canvases, lamented that the public preferred "things not thoughts." Moving from America to England, Copley passed from

an art whose soul was empirical to one whose soul was conceptual, societal, and theatrical.

Two self-portraits record his inner migration: a pastel at the age of thirty-one shows, but for the touch of vanity in the elegant, leisurely costume, an enigmatically bland young man, his eyes watchfully on you. A tondo in oils after a decade in London paints in dashing brushstrokes a faintly haggard man of fashion in his forties. His eyes, directed away from us, are those described by an observer, not long after he had left America, as “small eyes, which, after fatigue, seemed a day’s march in his head.” Always laborious in his painstaking methods—sitters, including the younger daughters of George III, complained of being “wearied” during the many sittings Copley demanded—he had left behind the land that had rewarded him with unchallenged eminence and what he described as a “pretty living” of three hundred guineas a year, for an England where he always struggled to prove himself. Lloyd Goodrich’s essay puts it bluntly: “America lost her greatest artist, to add another good painter to the British school.”

IN THE ninety-eight years that went by between Copley’s birth and that of Winslow Homer, on Boston’s Friend Street, into the family of a well-to-do hardware merchant, Boston still had acquired no art school and very little of an artistic community. When young Winslow, whose mother was a dedicated amateur watercolorist, expressed a desire to be an artist, the best his indulgent father could do for him was to purchase, on a business trip to England, some instructive lithographs and to arrange for his son’s apprenticeship to an acquaintance, the commercial lithographer John H. Bufford. Winslow Homer did not speak well of his two years with Bufford; he called working ten hours a day for five dollars a week “bondage” and “slavery” and a “treadmill existence.” On his twenty-first birthday, he left Bufford’s and set up shop in Boston as a free-lance illustrator; he caught on very quickly, first with *Ballou’s Pictorial* and then with *Harper’s Weekly*, in New York.



WINSLOW HOMER *The Sharpshooter on Picket Duty*, 1862–63 Oil on canvas, 12½ × 16½" Portland Museum of Art, Maine. Gift of Barbra and Bernard Osher, 1992.41 ([Illustration Credit 1.11](#))

In 1859, Homer moved to Manhattan, to be closer to his main source of income; there, in what had become the country's most vital artistic center, he took lessons in painting and enrolled in life classes. His artistic education, however, was interrupted by the Civil War; in late 1861, *Harper's* sent him as a "special artist" to "go," he wrote his father, "with the skirmishers in the next battle." Instead of going to Europe, as he and his family had intended, he went to war. One of the many wood engravings based on the special artist's work that *Harper's* published in the next two years is titled *The Army of the Potomac—A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty*; it appeared in the issue of November 15, 1862, with the attribution "From a Painting by W. Homer, Esq." This was his very first painting, done in his late twenties. His friend Roswell Shurtleff attested that he "sat with him many days while he worked on it," in Homer's studio in New York's University Building. It is, in its careful delineation of pine branches and rumpled trousers, "liney," though the darkness that swallows the marksman's head expressionistically conveys the "horror of that branch of the service" which Homer shared with ordinary foot soldiers.

The painting by Homer chosen for the NEH portfolio, *The Veteran in a New Field*, also concerns that most deadly of American wars, but from the happier perspective of disarmament. Painted in 1865, the canvas was used for a woodcut in an issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of July 1867, illustrating an article celebrating the widespread return of armies from the fields of battle as a triumph of a democratic society. The woodcut is liney, stalk by stalk, but the painting is not; the field being harvested forms a wall of solid golden-brown, and the stalks already cut in the foreground are indicated by a quite loose sprawl of dry brushstrokes. A close friend of Homer's, the painter Eugene Benson, also the art critic for the *New-York Evening Post*, asserted of this painting that its style was "an effective protest against a belittling and ignoble manner in art"—that is, of the American followers of the English Pre-Raphaelites—and "a sign of that large, simple and expressive style which has made the names of Couture and Millet ... so justly honored."

French art had replaced English as the model; the peasants dignified in the images of Jean-François Millet and the landscapes of the Barbizon School, freed of mythological apparatus, prepared the ground for Impressionism and its vivacious brushwork—"the touch, the sweep, the dash of the brush," Benson wrote. Without these, "no man can be called a great painter." In late 1866, Homer and Benson sailed for Europe, and Homer spent nearly all of 1867 in or near Paris; it has been said, in a tone of complaint, that Homer paid insufficient attention to the newest French art, and returned with no sign of French influence; but even a painter as self-willed and individual as Winslow Homer needs courage, and he returned to his studio in the University Building with a braver style.

An oil like *Croquet Scene* in 1866 has the static liney-ness and posed "human interest" of his woodcuts. A holiday seaside scene such as *Long Branch, New Jersey*, of 1869, strikes quite another note—breezier, vaster, with a deep perspective and an overall palette so bright we involuntarily squint. *Crossing the Pasture*, of 1872, epitomizes the Homeric country idyll—the open meadow splashed with wildflowers, the monumental children caught in a moment of reverie. With little or no recourse to French models, Homer has developed an American impressionism—the floating daubs of the flowers, the brilliantly painted tin pail, the

dazzlingly white shirt, the dashes of complementary green on the sun-reddened faces.



HOMER *The Veteran in a New Field*, 1865 Oil on canvas, $24\frac{1}{8} \times 38\frac{1}{8}$ " The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot, 67.187.131 ([Illustration Credit 1.12](#))



HOMER *The Veteran in a New Field*, 1867 Wood engraving, $4\frac{3}{16} \times 6\frac{1}{4}$ " Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Harvey Isbitts, 1998.105.99 ([Illustration Credit 1.13](#))

Another pair, *Boys in a Pasture*, two years later, gives us a low

horizon, a hat of sunstruck straw, a Pythagorean triangle, and beautiful bare feet—we can feel the grass tickle them. The medium of watercolor lightens and loosens his style quite marvellously; in *Apple Picking*, of 1878, opaque gouache strengthens the sun on the bonnets and skirts, while sunlight presses in yellow dabs, the same size as the red apples, through the lacy screen of trees. Red plays about the girls' shoulders and their all-but-hidden faces; they are caught in a magic moment instantly freighted with nostalgia. The style, which in some of Homer's watercolors can be as dry as the pencil underdrawing, is here fluid and wet.

He spent most of his second stay abroad in the North Sea village of Cullercoats, where his paintings of fisherwives, more studied and chromatically subdued than his American watercolors, achieved an uncanny stateliness, as of priestesses from classic Greece. After his return to America in late 1882, up to his death in 1910, his allegiance belonged almost entirely to water—swampy and shadowed in the Adirondacks, sparkling aquamarine in the Caribbean, thunderous, surfy, and titanic off the coast of Maine. His father and brother, early in 1883, had bought up almost all the peninsula in Maine called Prouts Neck. Visitors to Winslow Homer's separate cottage and studio may be struck, as was I, by how closely interwoven it was with the busy resort life his family had created within their compound, and how domesticated the nearby shore was, its walking paths worn through a broad margin of beach roses and grasses.



HOMER *Boys in a Pasture*, 1874 Oil on canvas, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ " Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Hayden Collection, Charles Henry Hayden Fund, 53.2552
[\(Illustration Credit 1.14\)](#)



HOMER *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*, 1894 Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 38 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
 Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Gift of William T. Evans,
 1909.7.29 [\(Illustration Credit 1.15\)](#)

From this cozy setting Homer wrested images of untamed wildness and power, scenes of water and rock generally unpopulated. *High Cliff, Coast of Maine* titles a beautifully radical work of 1894 in which the rocks are broken into fragments of color as if by the weariless pummelling of the waves; frustrated by the painting's failure to find a buyer for nine years, Homer, as if defiantly, signed it twice. But *Northeaster*, done the next year, is perhaps his signature canvas, unforgettable in the sense it gives us of the ocean's webbed, heaving weight. The following year's *Maine Coast* is similar but freer, almost carefree in the manner of its painting, in brush scribbles and palette-knife slatherings of raw white.

In admiring such pictures, and in gazing at the foaming left half of Homer's masterly tableau *Undertow*, painted ten years before *Maine Coast*, we cannot but be conscious of the paint itself, of thick white dabbled and stabbed, swerved and smeared into place in imitation of the water's tumultuous action; we simultaneously witness both the ocean in action and the painter at work. These arduous passages of tumbling foam and exploding spray are at once representations of natural phenomena and examples of painterly artifice; thing and idea are merged in the synthesis of artistic representation.

Though Homer observed and imitated the surging waves as intently as Copley did the sheen of fabric and hair, the effect is not "liney." The opposite of "liney," it turns out, is "painterly." It is not an aesthetic misstep to make the viewer aware of the paint and the painter's hand; such an empathetic awareness lies at the heart of aesthetic appreciation. Beginning as a rather dry, scratchy, anecdotal recorder of military and social life, serving in magazines an illustrative purpose that within a few more decades would be taken over by the novel art of photography and the technology of photoengraving, Homer ended as the wettest of artists, not only our supreme watercolorist but an inventor, on this continent, of Impressionism and action painting in oils.



HOMER *Undertow*, 1886 Oil on canvas, 29¹³/₁₆ × 47⁵/₈" Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955.4 ([Illustration Credit 1.16](#))



THOMAS EAKINS *John Biglin in a Single Scull*, 1873 Watercolor on paper, 16⁷/₈ × 23¹⁵/₁₆" Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Gift of Paul Mellon, B.A. 1929, in honor of Jules D. Prown, first director of the Yale Center for British Art, 1988.61.1 ([Illustration Credit 1.17](#))

IN THE long perspective of this talk, the only contemporary of Homer's worthy of being considered a rival is Thomas Eakins.

This watercolor, *John Biglin in a Single Scull*, was done in 1873, one of a number Eakins executed of scullers on the Schuylkill around Philadelphia. Though the scene is watery, the technique is dry—a preparatory study, as exact as a blueprint, for the painting has been preserved. The ripples this side of the scull have been calibrated with a scientific precision, stippled to serve up the boat’s reflection in measured wavelets. Eakins loved science, and his determination to give his students the undraped benefit of male anatomy put a cramp of scandal in his academic career. He dared attempt, in his portrait of Dr. Samuel Gross, to show, with Rembrandtesque chiaroscuro, surgery in progress, and in his portrait of Professor Benjamin Rand meticulously rendered the anatomy of a microscope. Only in his searching, tender portraits of friends and family members does he not seem “liney” to me; his favorite former student, Amelia Van Buren, is seated in a costume and a physical environment as carefully detailed as those in a Copley, but the brooding mood, and an evenly applied painterliness, unify and humanize the whole.



GRANT WOOD *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, 1931 Oil on Masonite, 30 × 40"
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund,
50.117 ([Illustration Credit 1.18](#))

And what others in our government-sponsored *Picturing*

America series might be called “liney”? Paul Revere, painted by Copley, reappears in Grant Wood’s 1931 oil *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. This aerial view certainly is guilty of what Benjamin West called “there being so much neatness in the lines.” But neatness was a main feature of Wood’s style, often used, as here, with a flavor of parody; the village is toylike, a Christmas-card village with its lit windows throwing out golden druggets onto the road. Revere’s steed is stretched out in the position of a hobbyhorse, and the playfully patriotic mood of Longfellow’s overfamiliar poem is knowingly evoked. *The County Election*, painted in 1852 by the less well-known Midwestern painter George Caleb Bingham, has the same too-good-to-be-true polish, a citizenry busily engaged in civic duties but for the two idle boys and a slumping man in the foreground. The 1975 mural *Sources of Country Music*, by Thomas Hart Benton, shows another energetically involved crowd, limned in Benton’s usually wiry, restless lines. Such cartoonishness genially asks for a suspension of disbelief while it presents not so much an American scene as a rendering of America’s self-image. An abundance of detail becomes, then, a reassurance that the vision is true, or will come true. What Joshua Reynolds called “Hardness in the Drawing, Coldness in the Shades, An over minuteness” verifies a collective vision.



GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM *The County Election*, 1852 Oil on canvas, 38 × 52" St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri. Gift of Bank of America, 44.2011
(Illustration Credit 1.19)



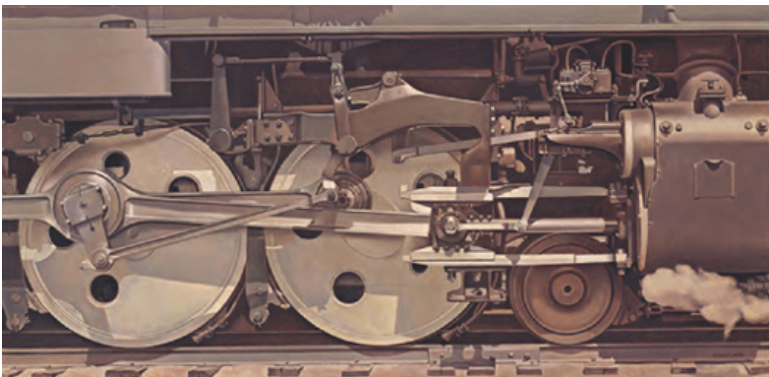
THOMAS HART BENTON *Sources of Country Music*, 1975 Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 120" Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, Tennessee
(Illustration Credit 1.20)

Charles Sheeler's 1930 *American Landscape* portrays, in muted cool colors, an actual industrial site—the Ford Motor Company's huge River Rouge plant, near Detroit—but ideally cleaned-up, with none of the grime, litter, and air pollution that actually attend industry. And—talk about “the clarity of things”—here are some locomotive wheels that Sheeler painted in 1939, entitled *Rolling Power*. With a passionate closeness, the details of piston and lever and fuel line are rendered to an effect of purity and silence, a reduction of machinery to its spiritual, Newtonian essence. In Walker Evans's 1929 photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge, the lines do not regulate the distribution of power but gracefully resist the downward pull of gravity, as the pointed arches of a Gothic cathedral do; Joseph Stella's painting ten years earlier uses those same lines to fragment a somewhat hectic native version of Cubism, an epochal European invention. In both Europe and America, pictorial art was permeated by the intuition that machinery constituted Man's future; Futurism, an Italian movement in a wide spectrum of arts, was launched in 1909, espousing a rejection of the past and its sentimental humanism,

and by the 1920s had involved its founder, the writer Filippo Marinetti, in support of Benito Mussolini and fascism, a totalitarian political creed prolific of romanticized, mechanized images of mass force.



CHARLES SHEELER *American Landscape*, 1930 Oil on canvas, 24 × 31" The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 166.1934 (Illustration Credit 1.21)



SHEELER *Rolling Power*, 1939 Oil on canvas, 15 × 30" Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. Purchased with the Drayton Hillyer Fund, 1940.18 (Illustration Credit 1.22)



WALKER EVANS *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1929 Gelatin silver print, $6\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{13}{16}$ " The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Arnold H. Crane, 1972.742.3
([Illustration Credit 1.23](#))



JOSEPH STELLA *Brooklyn Bridge*, c. 1919–20 Oil on canvas, 84 × 76" Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Gift of Collection Société Anonyme, 1941.690 ([Illustration Credit 1.24](#))



NORMAN ROCKWELL *Freedom of Speech*, 1943 Oil on canvas, 45¾ × 35½" Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts ([Illustration Credit 1.25](#))



ROCKWELL *Jockey Weighing In*, 1958 Oil on canvas, 33 × 31" New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Connecticut, 1969.76 ([Illustration Credit 1.26](#))

Is this propagandistic image by Norman Rockwell, *Freedom of Speech*, from *The Saturday Evening Post* of 1943, liney or painterly? It is rendered without visible brushwork, the hallmark of a painterly manner, and is crammed with fragments of faces—an ear here, an eye there—that are, to quote Reynolds again, “Each Part ... Equell in Strenght of Coulering and finishing, Each

Making to[o] much a Picture of its self.” Yet the artist does not fail on the score of “Due Subordination to the Principle Parts”; attention is focused from all sides on the speaker, who dominates this ideal town meeting, his starry-eyed, open-mouthed head framed by what we guess is a school blackboard. Rockwell, like Copley before him, gave heaping measure to his clients, principally the *Post* and its millions of readers, always exceeding the necessary with an extra caricatural vitality or, in his late works, with lovingly observed detail. It does not add to the joke of *Jockey Weighing In*, a *Post* cover of 1958, to make the scale so vivid a thing, nor do we need, in the winsome *Marriage License* of 1955, the brick-by-brick wall through the office window, the coat and hat on the hook, the spittoon, the geranium, and the kitten. Liney in its “over minuteness,” yes, but also painterly in its fond lavishness; this most successful of twentieth-century commercial artists also practiced art for art’s sake.



ROCKWELL *Marriage License*, 1955 Oil on canvas, 45½ × 42½" Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts ([Illustration Credit 1.27](#))



RICHARD ESTES *34th Street, Manhattan, Looking East*, 1979 Oil on canvas, 91 × 91" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 1.28](#))

The liney/painterly dichotomy persists to this day, and since the heyday of Rockwell it has taken many forms. Andrew Wyeth is liney and Fairfield Porter is not. Among the Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock achieves his signature effects with a welter of lines, and Mark Rothko achieves his by blurring all edges. Among Pop artists, Roy Lichtenstein takes the comic-strip lines and Benday to a majestic scale, whereas Andy Warhol remains a colorist above all.

And what of these painstaking lines painted by the photorealist Richard Estes in 1979 and titled *34th Street, Manhattan, Looking East*? The “over minuteness” is such that dozens of tiny signs can be read and the pale Empire State Building in the distance is reflected by the exquisitely replicated smear in the foreground. This remarkable artist, beginning with commercial work in advertising and with paintings in a semi-Pop, Larry Rivers

manner, quickly became the precisionist limner of our glassy, thing-ridden city streets. His every canvas confronts us with something vitally actual, beyond illusion.

Two centuries after Jonathan Edwards sought a link with the divine in the beautiful clarity of things, William Carlos Williams wrote in introducing his long poem *Paterson* that “for the poet there are no ideas but in things.” *No ideas but in things*. The American artist, first born into a continent without museums and art schools, took Nature as his only instructor, and things as his principal study. A bias toward the empirical, toward the evidential object in the numinous fullness of its being, leads to a certain liney-ness, as the artist intently maps the visible in a New World that feels surrounded by chaos and emptiness.



GILBERT STUART *Self-Portrait*, 1778 Oil on canvas, $16\frac{3}{4} \times 12\frac{3}{4}$ " Redwood Library & Athenæum, Newport, Rhode Island. Bequest of Louisa Lee Waterhouse of Cambridge, Massachusetts ([Illustration Credit 2.0](#))

Making Faces

AS A PAINTER, Gilbert Stuart was just barely American. The son of a newly immigrant Scots snuff miller, he was born in 1755 in Rhode Island, and was soon moved to cosmopolitan Newport, a flourishing port active in the triangular trade that turned molasses into rum and rum into African slaves. The young Stuart showed precocious musical ability, and in his journeyman years often played the organ in churches to make ends meet. When he turned, in his teens, to sketching and painting, Scots artists Cosmo Alexander and his brother-in-law, Sir George Chalmers, took the young man's apprenticeship, loosely, in hand. In Alexander's care Stuart travelled, in 1771 or 1772, to Edinburgh. He returned to Newport in 1773 with enough skill to sell some stiffish portraits, echoing John Singleton Copley's literalist style, to local merchants. Then, like Copley, he sought greener, and less politically ruffled, pastures in the mother country; he arrived in London at nineteen and stayed for twelve years, becoming a successful portraitist in the glamorous, colorful, fluent English manner.

If there is anything specifically American left within Stuart's accomplished brilliance, it might be a reluctance to flatter his subjects, as he probes the carapace of class with a certain debonair candor and psychological acuity. *Joshua Reynolds* (1784), for instance, shows the esteemed ruler of the Royal Academy as suspicious and a bit bleary, holding not a paintbrush but a snuffbox. *John FitzGibbon* (1789–90) sumptuously renders the gold-lace-trimmed robes of black silk damask, the shiny satin knickers, the—to quote the eloquent and informative catalogue by Carrie Rebora Barratt and Ellen G. Miles—“formal full-bottom wig,” the “ornate harped crown of the silver-gilt mace,” and, in an especially striking bravura passage of brushwork, the embroidered and appliquéd square of the Lord Chancellor's purse, for carrying an official speech. But amid all this regalia Stuart includes FitzGibbon's sharp, small, scornful face, almost angry with haughtiness, pinched as it were by his piled-on prerogatives.

We can believe that, as Barratt tells us in one of her catalogue essays, FitzGibbon's "funeral procession in 1802 was trailed by a jeering, pelting mob."



STUART *Self-Portrait* (detail), 1786 Oil on canvas, 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ " The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Fletcher Fund, 26.16 ([Illustration Credit 2.1](#))

Stuart's urbane development left scarcely a splinter of the woodenness that lingers in the work of his compatriots Copley and Benjamin West—West, who took the starving novice Londoner on as a studio assistant "finishing drapery and backgrounds on what Stuart would later refer to as his master's 'ten-acre pictures.'" However Anglicized his painting became, Stuart's career was recognizably American: dishevelled, reckless, well publicized, debt-ridden, desperately industrious but

profligate. He lived on a large scale in London, and he and his wife eventually produced twelve children. He not infrequently quarrelled with his portrait subjects; his garrulousness while painting did not please every sitter; he left many canvases unfinished. His biographer Dorinda Evans focuses on what she defines as “an affliction of bipolarity”; there is ample testimony that he was frequently “under the influence of the devil who steals men’s brains if permitted to enter their mouths”—that is, he was “attached to drinking.” Debts and a waning patronage led him to move from London to Dublin, where for six years he prolifically painted the Anglo-Irish elite of the thriving, attractive Georgian city. In 1793, however, he set sail for New York, determined to win permission to paint a portrait of George Washington, the heroic president of the republic that had replaced the colony Stuart had abandoned eighteen years before.

Stuart was in full possession of his gifts by the age of twenty, and for the next fifty years, in spite of drink and debt and fits of temper, he plied those gifts at a high level. The portraits he did in Boston, his last city of residence, from 1805 to 1828, include some of his best; their appeal is actually intensified, to a contemporary eye, by some hasty, rough, and unfinished patches. In the cursorily outlined cannon on which the portly old warrior Henry Knox (1806) rests his chunky fist, and in the boldly spattery epaulettes and decorations worn by Major General Henry Dearborn (1812–13), and in the Manet-like grays and gray-browns and blacks of the dashing portrait of Stuart’s close friend and distinguished competitor John Trumbull (1818), we feel the artist’s well-practiced hand enjoying itself. Age itself is confronted, as Stuart’s life winds down, in two portraits of subjects in their late eighties: John Adams (1823–24), his thoughtful eyes still glinting in his eroded and truculent face, and Lydia Pickering Williams (1824), armored in frilly lace cap and muslin fichu, her large nose illustrating the artist’s theory that the nose is the key to “likeness and character.” Her little sunken mouth, half smiling like that of the *Mona Lisa*, is what we fasten on, though, as if it might start to speak, perhaps voicing a version of her dry recorded opinion “that she was too old, & that in a few years, the portrait would be transferred by her grand children to the garret.”



STUART *Henry Knox*, 1806 Oil on wood, $47\frac{7}{8} \times 38\frac{5}{8}$ " Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Deposited by the City of Boston, L-R 30.76b ([Illustration Credit 2.2](#))



STUART *Lydia Pickering Williams*, 1824 Oil on canvas, 36 × 28" Historic New England, Boston ([Illustration Credit 2.3](#))

The Metropolitan exhibition has divided Stuart's long career into the cities he worked in—Newport, London, Dublin, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and Boston—the rooms painted in bright flat Williamsburg colors, yellow and maroon. The naïve family portraits he did in Newport (the Banister family, c. 1773; the Malbone brothers, c. 1774) were quickly surpassed by the intent, shiny-skinned head of his friend Benjamin Waterhouse (1775), who gave up his early interest in drawing “in despair” of

competing with Stuart, and took up the study of medicine instead; Waterhouse was to enhance American well-being significantly by introducing smallpox vaccine in 1800, and provided in his autobiography useful reminiscences of his childhood friend.



STUART *Henrietta Elizabeth Frederica Vane*, 1782–83 Oil on canvas, 65 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 38 $\frac{3}{8}$ "
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. Gift in memory of
Jessie Rand Goldthwait by her husband and daughter, 1957.39 [Illustration](#)

In London, Stuart proved an apt pupil of English masters, imitating the seventeenth-century William Dobson with a luminous self-portrait of 1778 (he looks lean and harried, as in his only other known self-portrait, an oil sketch of 1786) and glorifying the children of aristocrats as adroitly as Gainsborough and Reynolds and Romney. The subject of *Master Clarke* (1783–84) is almost too darling in his all-red suit and long blond curls, and he gingerly poses with bow and arrow in front of a tree trunk that looks painted on a stage flat; the background of the intensely perky *Henrietta Elizabeth Frederica Vane* (1782–83) is even more cursorily brushed in, but—a charming touch—an insubstantial tree extends a tenuous twig that the substantial child tenderly grasps in a well-drawn little hand, implausibly uniting foreground and background. It is a magical large painting, though it was not Stuart's nature to treat juvenile subjects with the kind of overanimation that Copley lavished on his ecstatic vision of *The Three Youngest Daughters of George III* (1785).

Stuart was nothing of a landscapist, and little of a naturalist. The artificial and sketchy backgrounds of high-end English portraiture well suited what appears to have been a thoroughly indoor temperament; in his head of Copley (c. 1784) and his full-length portrait of the redoubtable Captain John Gell (1785), Nature figures as a diagonal blur of pale and dark clouds—a Romantic scribble of windy English weather. In *The Skater* (*William Grant*) (1782), a tour de force among Stuart's best-known works, the disconnect between subject and environment leads us to doubt the reality of the ice upon which the stately skater so gracefully, gravely poses. Lean-necked Eleanor Gordon (c. 1783–84), with her luxuriant tumble of dark-brown hair, lightly holds a sheet of music in a vague setting of thinly brushed beige silhouettes, whether indoors or outdoors is hard to tell. There is vagueness, also, about her identity; she might be Charlotte Clive.

Even in this exhibit's choice selection, one can see that Stuart's attention sometimes flagged in his profession of, as he called it, "making faces." Among the bland and interchangeable *Children of the Second Duke of Northumberland* (1787), only the greyhound's golden eye and the aqua-colored feathered hat on the extreme left

seem to have really caught the painter's fancy. He gave his full attention, however, to the pursy, censorious expression of his mentor Benjamin West (1783–84), and to the rueful reverie of the expatriate Mohawk Joseph Brant (1786), who had fought under British command in the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars and ornamented London court society with his mixture of Iroquois headdress and metallic emblems of his service to the King.



STUART *John FitzGibbon*, 1789–90 Oil on canvas, 96½ × 60⅝" The Cleveland Museum of Art. General Income Fund, 1919.910 ([Illustration Credit 2.5](#))

During his six Dublin years, Stuart executed the richly accoutered images of John FitzGibbon and, of exactly equal size and splendor, that of his political opponent, the speaker of the Irish House of Commons, John Foster (1790–91). But Ireland seems to have roused mostly a domestic mood. The double portrait labelled *Anna Dorothea Foster and Charlotte Anna Dick* (1790–91) weirdly seems to show the same young woman, in profile and then in three-quarters view, as if anticipating his often reproduced triple portrait of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte (1804). A high level of satisfaction, for painter and subjects both, is reached in the pendant portraits of Catherine Lane Barker and William Barker (both c. 1791), tranquilly busy with her needlework and his architectural plans, and in the image of William Burton Conyngham (c. 1791–92), his modest travelling clothes of wool and velvet belying his status as an enlightened and active aristocrat whose library, after his death, occasioned “the largest book auction in the country’s history.” For these worthies Stuart employed a slightly soft focus that, combined with the sensible life he instills behind the appraising eyes of his subjects, will win the patronage, after his return to the New World in the spring of 1793, of prominent New Yorkers and, above all, of the political eminences of the United States.

His portrait of John Jay (1794), who gave Stuart entrée to New York’s elite circles as well as a crucial letter of introduction to President Washington, is oddly milky and contains—what is almost becoming a Stuart signature—unresolved passages. In his pastel-colored *William Bayard* (1793–94), the inkwell on the table is sketched in black twice, the letter Bayard holds in his hand is a hasty stab in white, and his coat is rumpled by a chair that is not there. Nevertheless, the innocently tentative and quizzical look on the young merchant king’s visage and the jaunty levity of his pale-green jacket and dotted pink vest make this one of Stuart’s freshest works. The battered face of Horatio Gates (1793–94), above the virtuoso rendering of his general’s uniform, and the thin, wry features of Catherine Brass Yates (1793–94), as her finely painted hands manipulate a needle and thread, are lifted out of homeliness into the charm of vitality. Most dazzlingly, Matilda Stoughton de Jaudenes y Nebot (1794), the American wife of an aspiring minor Spanish official, sits drenched in displayed wealth; pearls, diamonds, gold embroidery, and lace

trim are topped by a preposterous plumed coronet fastened to her frizzy wig by pearl-rimmed brooches, while her face, aping the arrogance of her husband in a pendant portrait, dares the viewer to doubt her status. She is every inch an aggressively expensive New Yorker, yet Stuart lets us see that she is quite young, an obedient girl frozen in her party dress, and he exposes the dulcet slope of one breast.



STUART *John Jay*, 1794 Oil on canvas, 51½ × 40⅞" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift, partial and promised, of the Jay family ([Illustration Credit 2.6](#))



STUART *William Bayard*, 1793–94 Oil on canvas, 36 × 28" Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Viscountess Eccles, 2004.37 ([Illustration Credit 2.7](#))



STUART *Matilda Stoughton de Jaudenes y Nebot*, 1794 Oil on canvas, 50⁵/₈ × 39¹/₂"
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 07.76 ([Illustration](#)
[Credit 2.8](#))



STUART *Catherine Brass Yates*, 1793–94 Oil on canvas, 30 × 25" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1940.1.4 ([Illustration Credit 2.9](#))

The next, sixth room is the heart of the show, and the reason so many parents brought their children. Fourteen portraits of the Father of Our Country in one great custard-yellow room—a herd? a flock? a bevy? of George Washingtons! Such a concentration has its comedy as well as a surreal grandeur. The image is so familiar as to leave an art reviewer wordless. Even the chirping children were momentarily hushed. Stuart, who by 1796 had moved his studio from fever-ridden Philadelphia to exurban

Germantown, painted the president from the life three times. The first portrait, the so-called Vaughan (1795), depicted Washington in three-quarters view, showing the right side of his face; that original has disappeared, and the early replica most resembling it (it is speculated) hangs in the Frick, which does not loan but which allowed a digitized reproduction of it to hang on view. Four other collections did loan the Met copies executed at least in part by Stuart. His belief that there was a market for paintings of George Washington was well founded, and all in all he painted (and sold) at least a hundred of them.

The image he most favored was the so-called Athenæum version (1796), commissioned by Martha Washington to hang in Mount Vernon along with her own portrait; but Stuart never finished them, or parted, despite Martha's pleas, with the bodiless heads he had captured. On his death, the canvases went to the Boston Athenæum; since 1980, they have been jointly owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the National Portrait Gallery. Stuart copied this head of Washington over and over, and seven versions hang along one wall—some pinker than others, some frizzier in the wig, some funnier around the mouth, and one with a linen jabot instead of lace. It is this image that, flipped so the right instead of the left side of the face is presented, was used on the one-dollar bill, where the engraving for some reason looks more like Washington—calmer, steelier, more godlike and *validated*—than any painting does.



STUART *George Washington* (Vaughan Portrait), 1795 Oil on canvas, $28\frac{1}{4} \times 23\frac{1}{4}$
" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Andrew W. Mellon Collection,
1942.8.27 ([Illustration Credit 2.10](#))



STUART *George Washington* (Athenæum Portrait, detail), 1796 Oil on canvas, 48 × 37" National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., NPG.80.115, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1980.1 ([Illustration Credit 2.11](#))

The full-length Lansdowne portrait (1796), displayed in three versions (including the probable original) at the Met, was completed, as was customary, with a stand-in for the body, and Washington's step-grandson George Washington Parke Custis complained that the stand-in was fatter than Washington, whose body was "a matchless combination of bone and muscle." There is certainly a touch of drollery in Washington's portly, splay-footed stance as he gestures with an open hand as if to say, of creating a nation, "Well, what else can you do?" Though Stuart's Washington has become the nation's Washington, the three portraits are not the painter's liveliest. Washington was a difficult subject; there were his new false teeth (ivory—not wood, as tradition has it) and an understandable air of preoccupation. A friend of the artist, Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, later wrote of the president, "When he sat to Stuart, as the latter has often stated, an apathy seemed to seize him, and a vacuity spread over his countenance, most appalling to the painter." Stuart, the story continues, jostled the president into animation by talking about horses; but Washington, like today's supermodels, wears the

blank look that resonates deepest with the public. He is our first, and greatest, supermodel.



STUART *George Washington* (Lansdowne Portrait), 1796 Oil on canvas, 97½ × 62½" National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.,



STUART *Jerome Bonaparte*, 1804 Oil on canvas, $28\frac{1}{4} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$ " Private collection
([Illustration Credit 2.13](#))



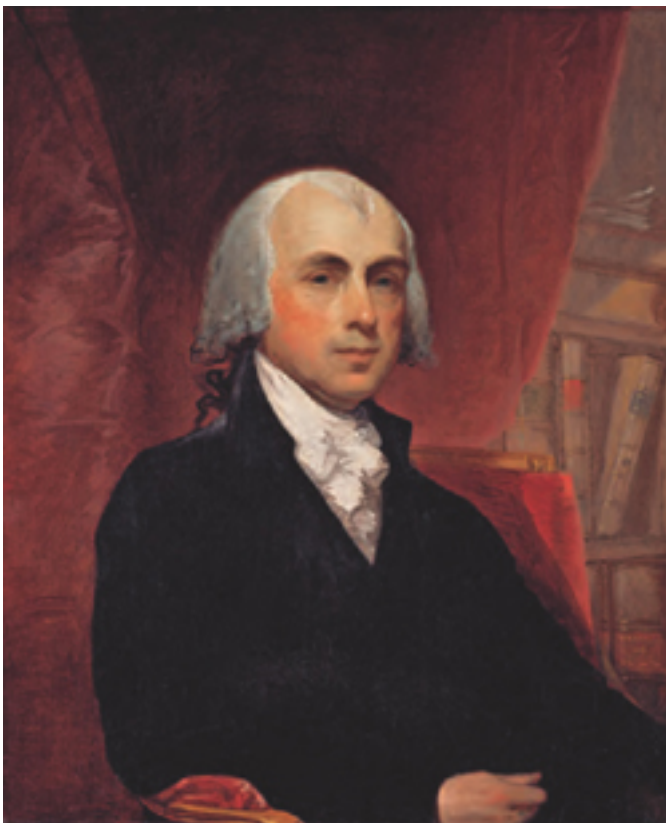
STUART *Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton*, c. 1800–1802 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Gift of the grandchildren of Joseph Tuckerman, 1899.2 ([Illustration Credit 2.14](#))

After his third presidential sitting in 1796, Stuart still had thirty-two years, and many portraits, to go, as the leg-weary museumgoer will discover. The painter moved from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., in 1803, before heading to Boston in 1805. There are some gems in the later rooms. More southerly habitation seems to have warmed him to the fair sex: witness the fetching, fleshy images of Elizabeth Parke Custis Law (1796); Anne Willing Bingham (1797), with her mannish eyebrows and deep décolletage; green-eyed, plaid-becapped Mary Willing Clymer (1797); Elizabeth Corbin Griffin Gatliff (1798), who looks

remarkably like Bill Clinton, if Clinton had curly locks; peachy, perky Ann Penington (1805); sultry Sarah McKean, Marquesa de Casa Yrujo (1804); Elizabeth Beltzhooover Mason (1804), that minx, with her cockily uptilted chin; red-haired Marcia Burnes Van Ness (1805); and—a woman with whom Stuart enjoyed some currents of affection and mutual regard—Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton (c. 1800–02), who stares out enigmatically, enticingly, through a loose and even hectic flurry of brushstrokes. She calmly explodes from the canvas, and Stuart's breezy action painting takes our breath away. Similarly rough and glamorizing is the portrait of Jerome Bonaparte (1804), who either wandered off or exhausted Stuart's patience but is splendidly realized nonetheless. As to Jefferson (1805–7, 1805–21, 1805), Madison (1804, 1805–7), and Monroe (1817, 1821), these are the visages of record. The republic was fortunate to have, in its fledgling years, a portrait painter so professionally, so Europeanly adept, yet Yankee enough to peer through the social mien at the inner life behind it.



STUART *Thomas Jefferson* (Edgehill Portrait), 1805–21 Oil on wood, 26 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 21"
Monticello, The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., Charlottesville, Virginia,
1982.53, and National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington,
D.C., NPG.82.97 ([Illustration Credit 2.15](#))



STUART *James Madison*, 1804 Oil on canvas, $29\frac{1}{2} \times 24\frac{5}{8}$ " The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia. Gift of Mrs. George S. Robbins, 1945.25.A&B ([Illustration Credit 2.16](#))



STUART *James Monroe*, 1817 Oil on wood, 26 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ " Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Academy purchase, 1900.4 ([Illustration Credit 2.17](#))

Gilbert Stuart, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October 21, 2004–January 16, 2005.



FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH *El Khasné, Petra*, 1874 Oil on canvas, 60½ × 50¼" Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, ol.1981.10 ([Illustration Credit 3.0](#))

The Love of Facts

THE CURRENT EXHIBIT of eighteen oil paintings displayed in two wood-panelled, second-floor rooms at the National Academy Museum on Fifth Avenue shows us that Frederic Edwin Church, the most successful and ostentatiously skillful of mid-nineteenth-century American landscapists, was, when he let himself go in his quick on-site oil sketches, a dashing wielder of the brush. Speed of execution let air into his art. A large showpiece like *The Heart of the Andes* (1859), which thousands in New York and London paid admission money to see, has come to have the creepy feel of a huge piece of nature immobilized under glass. Church himself must have felt the superior liveliness of his preliminary oil studies, for he framed them and kept them in Olana, the *Arabian Nights* dream-home he built for himself and his family in the early 1870s, on a hilltop in view of the Hudson, on two hundred fifty acres he had begun to buy before the Civil War.

He boasted, “Almost an hour south of Albany is the Center of the World—I own it.” The word “Olana” is one that Mr. and Mrs. Church found applied to a “fortress” or “treasury-storehouse” in ancient Persia. According to Kevin J. Avery’s description in his excellent and entertaining catalogue text, Olana feels like a fortress from outside and is a musty treasury within, evoking “nothing so much as a silent-film set, minus a turbaned Douglas Fairbanks Sr. bounding down the stairs.” Avery can scarcely suppress the horror roused in him by the Churches’ *horror vacui*:

Everywhere—the glinting and glossy bric-a-brac: bronze, brass, iron or steel birds, a Buddha, candelabra, curtain rods, platters, planters, trays, urns, censers, shields, swords, and lances; ceramic vases, pitchers, jars, dishes, cups, and saucers. No horizontal surface in the house is clear of these *tchotchkes*, including the floor: it is the vacant chairs in each room that assure one that people lived here, though the furniture’s own busy surface decoration challenges even that assumption. From the first Church must have intended that the house would be the repository and museum of his worldly experience and taste.

Church, before his death in 1900, made sure, by appointing his

son Louis as professional caretaker of his property, that his collected “plethora of the exotic” would remain intact; after Louis’s death in 1943, his widow, Sally Good Church, became the devoted caretaker of the fabulous hoard, and two years after her death in 1964, the state of New York, led by art-minded Governor Nelson Rockefeller, assumed the duties of preservation, making the house with its contents and grounds a historic site and public park. Thus Church, for decades relegated to the rolls of the half-forgotten, succeeded in imposing not only his house on a hilltop but his furniture and travel souvenirs on generations of tourists. Paradoxically, in assembling this domestic monument to his own High Victorian taste, Church included samples of his work at its most free-spirited and modern.



ANDY WAINWRIGHT *Olana, Northeast Corner*, 2004 Color photographic print. Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation ([Illustration Credit 3.1](#))



KURT DOLNIER *Sitting Room at Olana, with "El Khasné, Petra," over the Fireplace*, 1997 Color photographic print. Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation ([Illustration Credit 3.2](#))

The show is divided, unchronologically, between paintings done by Church on his travels and those done nearer home. He came to European travel late; though his father was a wealthy Hartford jeweller who could certainly have underwritten the Grand Tour, then nearly requisite for an aspiring American artist, Frederic's apprenticeship to the chief American painter of landscapes, Thomas Cole, and his own early success under Cole's tutelage and at the New York City Art-Union, and his forays within North America, as far as Kentucky, Niagara Falls, and Canada's Maritime Provinces, all made a transatlantic education seem superfluous.

His farthest journeys before the Civil War took him to South America and the equatorial Andes, where the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt had, as Avery puts it, "perceived an ideal encapsulation of Earth's varied habitats, hot to cold, exhibiting a corresponding variety of flora and fauna." Mount Chimborazo, at 20,577 feet the tallest mountain in Ecuador, was thought to be the tallest in the world; Humboldt set a world

mountain-climbing record, which lasted for thirty years, by ascending to within thirteen hundred feet of its summit. On Church's first visit, in 1853, the top of the mountain was shrouded by clouds, but in 1857 it sat for its full portrait in the oil on academy board, *Mount Chimborazo at Sunset*. A year later, the mountain provided the basis for an eighteen-inch-wide *Study for "The Heart of the Andes."* Both those works, though relatively small, are more than sketches; Mount Chimborazo is majestically set off by a detailed brown foreground of rocky plains and two strips of red-tinged clouds in a pale-yellow sky, and the study for *The Heart of the Andes* lacks few details present in the huge finished oil, including foothills that have the dreary featurelessness of mud heaps. Church changed the sketch's palm trees for what look like birches, muting the tropical hot-to-cold range that Humboldt prized, and added the famous little grave with a white cross on the lower left, whereas the preliminary version satisfied itself with a mission church visible in the middle distance.

Church took his name seriously. His mentor Thomas Cole had been a pious Protestant, and so was Church. His early canvases especially evince, as Avery puts it, an "impulse to Christianize the landscape," and his flaming cloudscapes blazon forth God's glory. The biologist and science popularizer Stephen Jay Gould theorized that Darwinism, supplanting Humboldt's and the Reverend William Paley's theistic naturalism, dampened and discouraged Church in the later, declining decades of his career. This diagnosis leaves out the rheumatic arthritis that made holding a brush painful, and the contemporary criticism that Church in his work wasn't subjective and spiritual *enough*. His disenchanted student William James Stillman, an artist turned to journalism, in his 1901 autobiography delivered an indictment echoed by critics before and since:

He had little imagination, and his technical training had not emancipated him from an exaggerated insistence on detail....His retention of the minutest details of the generic or specific characteristics of tree, rock, or cloud was unsurpassed by the work of any landscape painter whose work I know, and everything he knew he rendered with a rapidity and precision which were simply inconceivable by one who had not seen him at work.... But he had no comprehension of the higher and broader qualities of art.... His love of facts and detail blinded him to every other aspect of our relations with nature, in the recognition of which consist the highest gift of

the artist.



CHURCH *Study for "The Heart of the Andes,"* 1858 Oil on canvas, 10¼ × 18¼"
Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, ol.1981.47 ([Illustration Credit 3.3](#))



CHURCH *The Heart of the Andes,* 1859 Oil on canvas, 66⅞ × 119¼" The
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Margaret E. Dows, 09.95
([Illustration Credit 3.4](#))

As it happens, in the epochal shift of tastes, a love of facts doesn't seem much of a defect now, and a reach toward higher and broader qualities arouses suspicion. Observant sketches on the spot have come to appear more soundly artistic than the finished canvases which strove to make an impressive, rounded statement. The one large painting in the Olana collection, *El*

Khasné, Petra (1874), was held back from sale and given to his wife as a metaphor of their splendid house and, opulently framed in Orientalizing rosettes, hung over the sitting-room fireplace; but it made this viewer uneasy, with its flavor of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. A pink slice of a rock temple used in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* glows through a gap between two towering, lavalike flanks. The stony curtain is being drawn back on a mystery, a piece of pillared architecture as lovingly rendered in its capitals and tympanum as the shadowed rock slabs taking up two-thirds of the canvas are dull, dark, and scrubby. The painting is a stunt, overtly theatrical. Church was a painter termed (in relation particularly to *The Heart of the Andes*) Barnumesque; he was drawn to subjects with an element of spectacle—flaming sunsets, glaring icebergs, erupting volcanoes (as in the red canvas *Cotopaxi*, 1862, not in the show), jungles, deserts. He performed the task, already being assumed by photography, of bringing visual news of a shrinking world's exotic sights. In his major work he did not generally trust—as did Vermeer, Chardin, and the Impressionists—painting to make its own spectacle out of ordinary, proximate existence.



CHURCH *Cotopaxi*, 1862 Oil on canvas, 48 × 85" Detroit Institute of Arts. Founders Society Purchase, Robert H. Tanahill Foundation Fund, Gibbs-Williams Fund, Dexter M. Ferry Jr. Fund, Merrill Fund, Beatrice W. Rogers Fund, and Richard A. Manoogian Fund, 76.89 ([Illustration Credit 3.5](#))



CHURCH *Scene in the Blue Mountains, Jamaica*, 1865 Oil on paper mounted on academy board, 10⁵/₈ × 17³/₄" Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, OL.1981.69 ([Illustration Credit 3.6](#))

Extreme literalism has become one of contemporary painting's possible styles, a somewhat campy tour de force. In Church's day it still had the dignity of botanical or geological investigation. Two meticulous oils on paper, done in Jamaica in the immediate wake of the Civil War—in what the grieving artist called a “change of scene, air and life” a month after the Churches lost their two small children to diphtheria—startle us with aspects of nature not seen in the American Northeast and with a sharply fresh, unstagy beauty. Both are almost entirely green in color, and, though painstakingly representational, have the overall look of many abstract canvases. *Scene in the Blue Mountains, Jamaica* (1865) renders a set of knife-sharp mountain ridges yellow-green with vegetation and devoid, but for a left-hand corner of nearby treetops, of any but the most minutely brushed, distance-diminished detail. That same summer's *Tropical Vines and Trees, Jamaica* presents a darker green in a close-up of jungle that, as if rhapsodically, gives each small leaf its dab of reflected light while growth crowds on growth in a frenzy of vegetation.

Returned to America in the fall, Church travelled with the same precise, impassive eye to Vermont, where he painted on paper *Blueberry Hill, Vermont*, a gravely quiet rendering—a “relatively spaceless, point-blank, broadside recording,” Avery says—of the autumn colors that the popular canvases of Jasper Francis

Cropsey flamboyantly emphasized. Church calmly sees, in the canvas's center, a grove of trees still keeping their green; on the mountains behind, scarlet is muted by distance to rust, and, in the right center, only one maple stands in full electric blush. Beneath this blazing tree, foreground rocks hold two parallel shadows, which the catalogue ascribes to two tree trunks, but which a sentimental viewer might construe as the elongating shadows of Church's two dead children. He was fond of painted memorials: he centered a cross in his early Catskill view *To the Memory of Cole* (1848), and he repainted *The After Glow* (1867), intensifying its central radiance and adding the ruins of a stone church to the foreground, in order to make it a remembrance of his sister Charlotte, who had died that year. Radiance haunts the last of his travel paintings on display, *Mexican Forest—a Composition* (1891), a crepuscular, even sinister study of tree trunks, done from within the forest in the manner of the newly fashionable Barbizon School, its minimal sunlight focused on one gnarly bole and upon a white bird, just beneath the painting's single, tiny patch of blue sky, flying free. The sexagenarian artist, his reputation fading and his body crippled by arthritis, seems here to be saying good-bye to the light that had bathed his triumphal panoramas.

When, in 1867, Church at last, with his wife and infant son (the first of four children that were to replenish his family), embarked for the Old World, it was not Rome or Paris that stirred his enthusiasm but the Near East and Greece. The curious pink ruins of Petra, a “lost” settlement mentioned in the Bible and located in present-day Jordan, prompted a sunny oil sketch (*The Urn Tomb, Silk Tomb, and Corinthian Tomb, Petra*, 1868) from a more revealing and intelligible angle than the big, peekaboo *El Khasné*. Germany prompted the steeply Alpine *Rainbow near Berchtesgaden, Germany* (1868), but he looked back “with particular favor on the sun-parched-forsaken Syria. There is poetry—not here.” Rome he found full of bad artists and “gross architecture,” with “dull heavy languid air ... so different from the brilliant exhilarating atmosphere of Greece.” The Parthenon, impressing Church far more than Roman ruins, elicited a somewhat tumultuous sketch, *The Parthenon and the Acropolis* (1869), worked up into a splendid, crystalline oil two years later, and the written testimony, “Daily I study the stones and find its

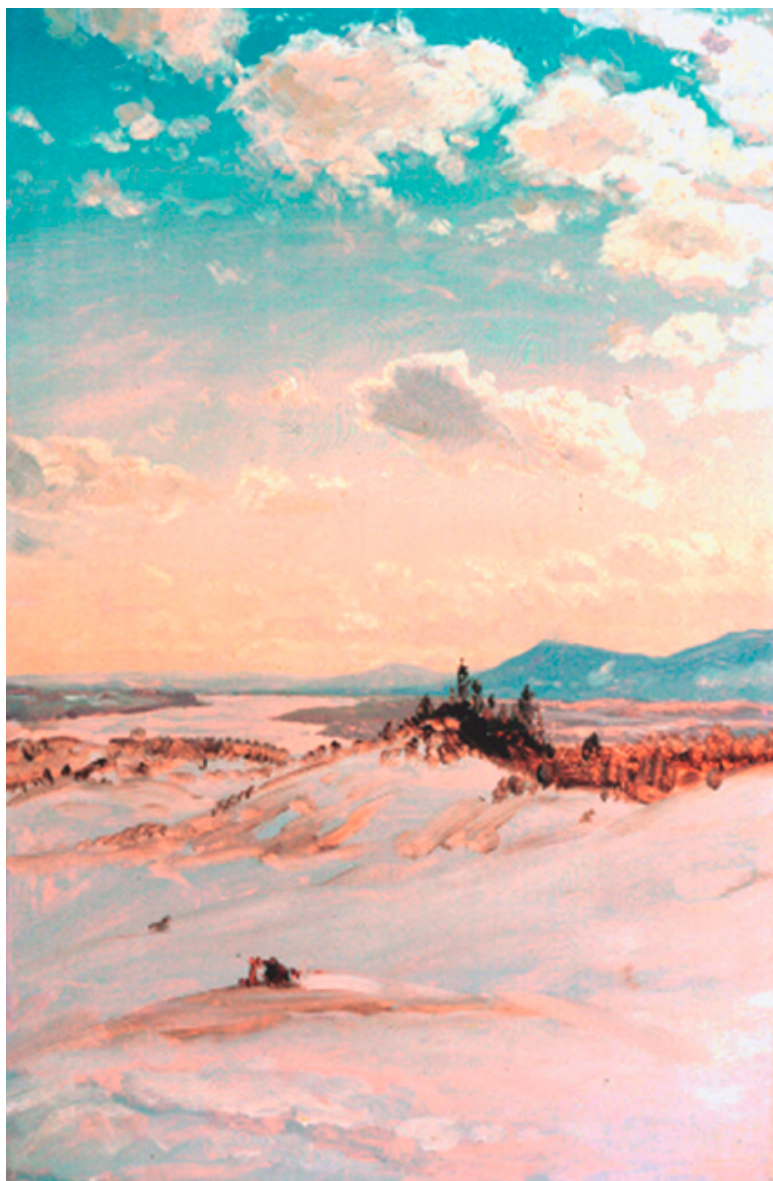
inexpressible charm and beauty growing on my senses.”



CHURCH *The Urn Tomb, Silk Tomb, and Corinthian Tomb, Petra*, 1868 Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 13 × 20½" Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, ol.1981.52 ([Illustration Credit 3.7](#))

The second, round room of the exhibit holds oil sketches done in New York State and around Olana. The earliest work on view, *The Catskill Creek* (1845), executed when Church was nineteen, seems much larger, more spacious and atmospheric, in the catalogue reproduction than does the real thing, which measures a mere twelve by sixteen inches. With its mirroring water and the boiling cumulus clouds rising behind the finely profiled mountain ridge, the painting testifies to Church’s phenomenal precocity. Cole is said to have claimed that his young pupil “possessed the finest eye for drawing in the world.” Twenty-seven years later, Church ebulliently daubed boiling clouds behind the profile of his newly completed Olana, and scrawled the date and his initials in the wet paint with the stub end of the brush (*Clouds over Olana*, 1872). In those same prime years, he accepted a few students himself and undertook, possibly as a pedagogic exercise, a series of winter sketches of the grounds around Olana; the one he framed and kept among his treasures, *The Hudson Valley in Winter from Olana* (c. 1871–72), is stunning in its virtuosity—in the dashing dabble of rapid brown strokes that does for winter foliage in the foreground, in the pale-gray glaze of the distant Hudson, in

the boldly crude spatter of white clouds scattered on the blue sky overhead. The vertical format, rare for Church, allowed him to sandwich a careful miniature landscape between two broad, loosely painted areas. Of the many American painters of snow, few have given us a white more creamy, and drifts more sweepingly indicated, than these.



CHURCH *The Hudson Valley in Winter from Olana*, c. 1871–72 Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 20¼ × 13" Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, OL.1980.36 ([Illustration Credit 3.8](#))



CHURCH *Study for "Under Niagara,"* c. 1858 Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 11¾ × 17½" Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, OL.1981.51 ([Illustration Credit 3.9](#))

Study for "Under Niagara" (c. 1858) deploys a brush loaded with white in depiction of cascading water; the brushstrokes, applied downward with a rhythmic pulse of pressure, become the water as it topples in distinct runnels down into the mist of impact. Church had chartered the tourist boat *The Maid of the Mist* to hover as close to the falls as he could; he executed his marvellously dynamic yet scrupulously analytic study in forty minutes. The painting derived from it is lost, and the retouched chromolithograph of the vanished oil seems crude and unlovely compared with the thunderous, light-struck, magically deft sketch.

Two more oil sketches of Niagara adorn the show. The first of these in time, *Niagara River Gorge* (1856), feels a little formalized and frilly in its rendering of the tossing whitecaps of rapids upriver from the falls; nor is the interplay between rocks and rushing water quite convincing, and the dark forest and gray clouds induce a Victorian claustrophobia. However, Church's foot-high, yard-wide study, on two pieces of paper, for the much-

admired, still-thrilling *Horseshoe Falls* (1856–57) is a consummate exercise, a thoroughly worked-out study for Church's nationalist masterpiece, the oil *Niagara* (1857), at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. The sketch, a touch lighter in tone than the seven-and-a-half-foot-wide finished canvas, with a yellow sky instead of a blue one, and less sky squeezed into its pertly eccentric shape, is perhaps the more pleasing of the two—certainly it ingratiates itself with a twenty-first-century viewer more readily than its slightly pompous offspring. The brushwork in the sketch brilliantly renders the speed and translucency and weight of the water sliding over the drastically foreshortened curve of the falls. Notice, especially, the dancing white strokes that, on the far edge of the curve, convey the lines of ripples on the descending current. As in the study of the falls from underneath, the activity of the brush *becomes* the activity of the water; painting and its subject merge. A kind of doom presents itself; we invest the river about to topple and crash, its submission to relentless gravity so empathetically pictured, with a soul; the grandeur is of ruin. Church's love of visual fact and close detail carries him here into a perhaps unintended mode, the instinctive American mode of naturalism, whose trend is to the tragic. In the years he was completing *Niagara*, Darwin was readying *The Origin of Species* for publication. Nature could never again be schematically Christianized, as it was by Humboldt.

Church's signature depictions of sunset clouds, too, are tinged by the tragic, the vast, the magnificently indifferent. At the Academy exhibition of Olana's private treasures, *Twilight, a Sketch* (1858), a twelve-inch-wide preparation for his large-scale *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860), fills the sky with a continent of luridly reddened cirrus receding to a horizon of the painter's pet sunset-yellow, above a purple line of mountains and a murky foreground of trees and river lit by the feeblest last gleams; *Sunset* (c. 1856–65) shows the sky as divided, along a line as plain as the Mason-Dixon Line, between that same yellow and a muted pink, while a thin scatter of orange-rimmed cirrus traces a gentle diagonal above a flat landscape already sunk deep in darkness. Whether or not these expressive, bloodied skies allegorize the Civil War that raged or impended as they were being painted, they cannot be said to be blind, as Stillman charged, to the broader, subjective side of "our relations with nature." It is true, Church was a

showman—he dramatized the big version of Niagara with a suggestion of a rainbow and a coming storm in the upper left corner. He did not bring to landscape the softer, more contemplative qualities of Sanford Gifford and John F. Kensett. But his passionate cloudscapes are in fact moving; they speak of beauty that is evanescent, be it in clouds or mountains, and of the helpless act of witness which the painter wordlessly achieves.



CHURCH *Horseshoe Falls*, 1856–57 Oil on two pieces of paper, joined together, mounted on canvas, 11½ × 35⅝" Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, OL.1981.15 ([Illustration Credit 3.10](#))



CHURCH *Sunset*, c. 1856–65 Oil on paper mounted on ragboard and panel, 11⅝ × 18¼" Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, OL.1980.1633 ([Illustration Credit 3.11](#))

Treasures from Olana: Landscapes by Frederic Edwin Church, at the National Academy Museum, New York, February 9–April 30, 2006.



PAUL CÉZANNE *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants*, 1890–94 Oil on canvas,
25¼ × 32¼" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Stephen
C. Clark, 61.101.4 ([Illustration Credit 4.0](#))

The Artful Clarks

THE TWO collecting Clark brothers, confusingly, are known as Sterling and Stephen, like a pair of twins, though they were born five years apart and their full names, Robert Sterling Clark and Stephen Carlton Clark, offered nominal alternatives. An exhibit on the brothers and their collections opened this summer in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and will be shown at the Metropolitan Museum in New York beginning next May. In the intent, proficient oil portraits by William Orpen which start off the Williamstown show, Sterling, in a high collar and dark suit, looks upright, prim, stern, and stuffy, whereas Stephen, slouching with a cigarette in hand, his seamed face half in shadow, appears somewhat louche and shifty. In fact, it was the other way around.

Stephen was a painfully dutiful businessman, and Sterling an adventurer, volunteering for the army upon his graduation from Yale's civil-engineering program and serving in the Philippines and China, where he fought in the Boxer Rebellion, including the taking of Peking. Resigning from his position as—according to the Washington press—"the richest man in the army," Sterling travelled to the West Indies and England, studying topography before mounting an eighteen-month exploring expedition to the little-known North Chinese regions of Shensi and Kansu. The expedition came to an abrupt end when its Indian cartographer was murdered. Undaunted, Sterling was planning a similar excursion to Egypt when, in 1910, with his already formidable wealth increased by the death of his mother in 1909, he bought a house in Paris and met the love of his life, Francine Clary, a French actress and, herself illegitimate, the mother of an illegitimate daughter, Viviane. Sterling and Francine lived together in his elegantly remodelled Right Bank *hôtel particulier* for nine years before getting married, in 1919, in a civil ceremony not attended by any of the Clark family. The next day, Francine became an American citizen, and the next year, at the age of forty-three, Sterling returned with his wife and stepdaughter to New York, establishing part-time residence in an

eighteen-room apartment on Park Avenue. He had stayed in Paris right through World War I, in which, with the rank of major, he served the U.S. Army as a bilingual liaison officer. For the rest of his life he devoted himself to collecting art, books, silver, and manuscripts, breeding horses in Upperville, Virginia, and opinionizing in his peppery diaries, without ever helping run the commercial enterprises that poured millions of dollars down upon him.



WILLIAM ORPEN *Robert Sterling Clark*, 1921–22 Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts,

Among four brothers—of whom the eldest and the third, Edward (“Rino”) and Ambrose (“Brose”), kept pretty much to the family estates in Cooperstown, New York, and the rustic pleasures of local squiredom—the work of business fell to the youngest, Stephen, who was an infant when the creator of the family fortune, Edward Clark, died in 1882. Edward Clark’s stroke of financial genius was achieved when, as a young lawyer from Athens, New York, he was transplanted with his legal partner, who was also his father-in-law, to New York City. Edward, alone in the firm, continued to indulge an eccentric client, the part-time actor Isaac Merritt Singer, who also laid claim to being the inventor of some improvements in a novel device, the mechanical sewing machine. Elias Howe in 1846 had already developed the basic eye-pointed needle and lock stitch, but five years later, Singer patented the spring presser foot and synchronous feed from an overhanging arm, which greatly enhanced the convenience and versatility of operation. Clark fended off the frequent patent challenges and became an equal partner in a company that in 1853 sold its first sewing machines and by 1890 accounted for 80 percent of the global sewing-machine market. Resigning his legal practice, Clark showed a flair for marketing, with such innovations as female demonstrators of the product, an installment plan of payment, and the establishment of foreign offices that made Singer one of the first international companies.

Singer himself was prolific both with his profits and his sperm, fathering, we learn from the exhibition catalogue, “about two dozen children from five different women.” The strait-laced, industrious Clark bought out more and more of his shares before and after the flamboyant inventor’s death in 1875. The next year, Clark assumed the booming firm’s presidency. By the time of his own death in 1882, he had survived three of his four children, leaving as sole heir the youngest son, Alfred Corning Clark. Alfred, though more interested in music than in business —“content,” as Neil Harris puts it in her graceful and informative catalogue essay on the Clarks and philanthropy, “to employ his considerable resources in pursuit of personal fulfillment”—left on his death in 1896 a fortune that exceeded J. P. Morgan’s legacy seventeen years later. His four sons had each already inherited

from their grandfather a block of West Side real estate.



ORPEN *Stephen Carlton Clark*, c. 1921 Oil on canvas, 37 × 30" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 4.2](#))

Stephen Clark, after Yale, attended law school, transferring from Harvard Law to Columbia to be nearer his ailing mother in New York City. He practiced law briefly but was more interested in politics, running as a Republican from Cooperstown for the State Senate and meeting defeat, but in 1909 winning a term in the Assembly. That same year, he married the highly suitable Susan Vanderpoel Hun, from a distinguished family of Albany

lawyers. They rented residences in Cooperstown and Manhattan, and Stephen undertook the duties of a director of the Singer Company. His grandfather in his will had expressed a desire that one of his descendants always sit on the board. In the words of the catalogue essay by Gilbert T. Vincent and Sarah Lees:

Edward felt it important that the Clark family maintain control of the Singer Company, keeping the business out of the hands of the Singer family themselves. Since none of his brothers were interested and Stephen felt it was necessary that one of them continue the family's business and philanthropic traditions, he assumed those responsibilities.

In a 1911 letter to Sterling, freshly set up in Paris with a dashing mistress and a Right Bank townhouse, Stephen mildly complained:

It is I who am doing all the work here at the office....I have to keep up all the old family traditions and I have to pay all the old servants....If I were looking at the matter from a purely selfish point of view, I would cut loose and have an office of my own....I haven't of course any idea of doing this, but I merely want to suggest these facts to you.

Up to his death in 1960, Stephen remained in the well-padded harness of a responsible New Yorker of extensive means, active in city philanthropies but also mindful of the needy town of Cooperstown, the birthplace of the fortune's founder's wife, Caroline Jordan. The town, which like many upstate farming communities had been left high and dry by the Erie Canal, became the Clark family's virtual demesne; by 1900, nearly 80 percent of its population worked for the Clark family in one way or another—on their farms and in the huge hotel and hospital they had built. Among Stephen's attempts to keep the town on the map, the most striking, and the most renowned, was the establishment, on the fallacious supposition that Abner Doubleday had invented baseball there in 1839, of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

In New York City, his willingness to serve the public good won Stephen membership on many boards, including that of the fledgling Museum of Modern Art and the mighty Metropolitan Museum of Art. He bestowed major works upon both institutions and at MoMA became both chairman of the board and president, being especially active there in the unsettled early Forties. His

consorting, in these positions, with museum staff and fellow board members helps account for the sophistication in taste that made him a more adventurous collector than Sterling, who sneered at any artist later than Renoir. Stephen bought not only Cézanne and Matisse but Miró and Picasso. However, after establishing himself as a notable early collector of Matisse, he sold all he owned, pronouncing, “Matisse is out.” Possibly his disenchantment had been influenced by Alfred Barr’s reception of a Matisse, *Coffee* (1917), which Clark gave to MoMA in 1941. Barr, MoMA’s celebrated and autocratic director, in the museum bulletin praised its “broad areas of color subtly combined” as representing “the more serious and perhaps more enduring side of Matisse’s art,” an implicit put-down of Matisse’s art after the painter’s move to Nice in 1917; this included every work in Clark’s collection. Of another Matisse Clark was thinking of donating, *The White Plumes* (1919), Barr reportedly “said it was cheesecake and didn’t want it in the collection.”



HENRI MATISSE *Coffee (Oriental Lunch)*, 1917 Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ " Detroit Institute of Arts. Bequest of Robert H. Tannahill, 70.174 ([Illustration Credit 4.3](#))



MATISSE *The White Plumes*, 1919 Oil on canvas, 28½ × 23⅞" Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 47.41 ([Illustration Credit 4.4](#))

As chairman of the museum's board, Stephen took offense at Barr's display, in 1942, of an elaborately decorated shoeshine stand and, the following summer, an exhibition of the primitive paintings of a retired Brooklyn slipper manufacturer, Morris Hirschfield. Later that year, he informed Barr that he was relieved of his curatorial duties and was being made advisory director at half-salary; for all his generous labors and charity on behalf of art in New York and elsewhere, Stephen is remembered as the man who "fired" Barr. One of Barr's associates proposed, "Without

knowing it, Alfred made Stephen Clark feel like a fool because Alfred was always right.” After giving MoMA its very first painting, Hopper’s still-cherished *House by the Railroad* (1925), and subsequently enriching the museum with benefactions of time and property, Stephen left nothing to MoMA in his will. He had resigned from the Acquisitions Committee early in the Fifties. A fellow committee member said, “I think his split with the Museum came, like Conger Goodyear’s, over Pollock. He couldn’t take Pollock.” Another insider blamed an acquired Giacometti, of a spindly man and chariot: “He just couldn’t stand Giacometti.”



JOHN SINGER SARGENT *Carolus-Duran*, 1879 Oil on canvas, 46 × 37¹³/₁₆” Sterling

and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955.14
([Illustration Credit 4.5](#))



THOMAS EAKINS *Dr. Agnew (D. Hayes Agnew)*, c. 1889 Oil on canvas, 49 × 31½"
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Bequest of Stephen

So Stephen's taste, too, like Sterling's, had limits. *The Clark Brothers Collect*, which nicely identifies the collector of each work in large but sideways lettering, is arranged to emphasize Stephen's relatively bold and progressive modernism. It offers the viewer pointed pairings: Sterling's theatrically glamorous portrait *Carolus-Duran* (1879) by John Singer Sargent hung next to Stephen's homely, scrubby *Dr. Agnew* (c. 1889) by Thomas Eakins; Sterling's softly brushed still life *Onions* (1881) by Renoir juxtaposed with Stephen's jaunty, slightly cockeyed *Still Life with Apples and Pears* (1885–87) by Cézanne.

Rather quickly the viewer learns to successfully guess the collector—the canvases Stephen owned (and often disposed of) tending toward the bold and willful, those owned by Sterling (who generally kept his treasures, and eventually created his own museum in Williamstown) a shade tamer and more sybaritic. The part-time Parisian collected with a continental sense of art as an accessory to a civilized life; the deskbound New Yorker with an American feeling for art as a frontier, a more or less desperate spiritual gamble. In the one Manet Stephen owned, *Young Woman Reclining in Spanish Costume* (1862–63), the plump young model provokes us with her sultry gaze, her awkward semi-recumbent position, her casually defiant cross-dressing in a male torero's shiny trousers, and the come-hither implication of her highlighted hands, while the painter provokes us with the virtuoso dabble of the playing kitten in the lower right corner. Sterling's Manet, *Interior at Arcachon* (1871), is a quick study in domestic peace and comfort, in a serene seaside drawing room. The figural painting hung as a contrast to Stephen's tense Manet is one of Sterling's many Renoirs, *Sleeping Girl with a Cat* (1880), in which not only the girl but the cat is subdued by slumber.



PIERRE-AUGUSTE RENOIR *Onions*, 1881 Oil on canvas, 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ " aSterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955.588
([Illustration Credit 4.7](#))



CÉZANNE *Still Life with Apples and Pears*, 1885–87 Oil on canvas, 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Stephen C. Clark,
61.101.3 ([Illustration Credit 4.8](#))

Nevertheless, collectors, however idiosyncratic and personal in their acquisitions, do not express themselves as fully in the works

they own as artists do in the works they create. Stephen and Sterling had access to the same New York and Paris markets, and indeed a number of paintings were at different times owned by both. Corot's exquisitely modest *The Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome* (c. 1835–40) was bought by Sterling in 1914, sold to his older brother Edward, who left it to Stephen, who traded it to a dealer as a credit toward purchasing Cézanne's *The Pool at the Jas de Bouffan* (painted in the late 1880s); the dealer sold it in 1946 to Sterling, who boasted that he would not sell it "for all the Cézannes in existence." The brothers successively owned the same Sargent oil sketch, *Resting* (c. 1875). Both collected Renoir, Sterling with a passion (he owned thirty-nine) that Stephen did not match, though Stephen owned, and gave to the Metropolitan, *Still Life with Peaches* (1881), showing the same faience jardinière as Sterling's *Apples in a Dish* (1883)—companion pieces united for the first time in this exhibition. Sterling does not always come in second in the competitive pairings. The apples above seemed to me to make a more solid painting—less fuzzy—than the peaches, and in a match between two Adirondacks painted by Winslow Homer, Sterling's *Two Guides* (c. 1875) is a masterpiece, whereas Stephen's *Hound and Hunter* (1892) shows Homer at his most dingy and merely illustrative. For whatever reason, Stephen gave *Hound and Hunter* to the National Gallery in Washington within a year of his purchase in 1946. He also gave to it the sombre *Self-Portrait* that Degas painted in oils on paper circa 1854; his brother's identically posed Degas, *Self-Portrait in a Soft Hat* (c. 1857–58), is smaller and less finished but livelier in color and more soulful in expression.

STERLING AND STEPHEN, though they lived only blocks apart on the East Side, never again spoke after a quarrel (indeed, a fistfight) in 1923 over the Singer trusts, which provided for Stephen's wife and family, since he was married when they were drawn up, but left out Francine and Viviane, Sterling having been still a bachelor at the time. Sterling had no biological children of his own. Stephen, with the concurrence of his two other brothers, defended the trusts as they were. Sterling in his diaries and letters recorded a continuing bitterness and a close, sometimes sardonic watch upon his brother's collecting.



JEAN-BAPTISTE-CAMILLE COROT *The Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome*, c. 1835–40 Oil on canvas, 13 $\frac{7}{16}$ × 18 $\frac{5}{16}$ " Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955.555 ([Illustration Credit 4.9](#))



CÉZANNE *The Pool at the Jas de Bouffan*, late 1880s Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ " The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Stephen C. Clark, 61.101.5 ([Illustration Credit 4.10](#))

Yet as collectors they showed a fraternal similarity, shying from publicity when other collectors of their generation, such as Chester Dale and Albert Barnes, courted attention. Each maintained that he acquired only works that gave him and his wife pleasure, and Stephen was quick to dispose of, through donation or deaccession, works that did not earn a place in his residences. Sterling kept his various and numerous acquisitions intact through the hazards of two world wars, and often thought of their eventual repository, providing in a 1946 will for a museum to be built on land he had acquired in Manhattan, near the Frick. But a fear of New York City's vulnerability in case of World War III, and a familial attachment to his grandfather's alma mater, Williams College, led him, near the end of his life, to create and endow on a hundred forty acres of land in Williamstown, Massachusetts, the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. The *Clark Brothers Collect* exhibition was shown there along with a permanent collection that extends from the Renaissance artists Ghirlandaio, Piero della Francesca, Signorelli, and Perugino to the American masters Sargent, Homer, and Remington. The Clark Institute also contains a great deal of silver, manuscripts, and nineteenth-century French painting, for which Sterling had a sweet tooth—he was so proud of Bouguereau's large, highly nude romp, *Nymphs and Satyr* (1873), which once hung in a New York barroom, that soon after acquiring it in 1943 he staged a benefit exhibition of the canvas for the Free French forces.



VINCENT VAN GOGH *The Night Café*, 1888 Oil on canvas, 28½ × 36¼" Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, 1961.18.34 ([Illustration Credit 4.11](#))

The show in Williamstown is climaxed, after rooms of the two brothers' mingled acquisitions, by a room devoted entirely to Stephen's modernist purchases—Toulouse-Lautrec's chalk-faced *Jane Avril* (c. 1891–92); van Gogh's eerie, insomniacal *The Night Café* (1888; he stayed up three nights to paint it, trying “to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green”); Bonnard's gorgeous *The Breakfast Room* (1930–31); two small, dowdy Vuillards, collagist in texture; two vertical, stiffish Picassos from the 1920s; a sampling of the opulent, streaky post-1917 Matisse's that Clark owned and disposed of; and, best of all, four luminous Cézannes given to the Metropolitan in 1960, the year he died: a version of *The Card Players* (c. 1890–92), a tender, sketchy portrait of *Madame Cézanne* (1891), the vibrant green-and-brown *Pool at the Jas de Bouffan*, and the splendid, tipsy *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants* (1890–94).

These treasures, the Cézannes above all, formed Stephen Clark's gift, for a summer season, to the Berkshires. But the traffic in beneficence runs two ways; next spring will bring to Manhattan Sterling's Renoirs and edgy early Sargent's and, most

impressively, his Winslow Homers. There is not only Renoir's much-reproduced *Blonde Bather* (1881), a baby-skinned bubble of a woman betranced beside a beryl sea, but *Girl Crocheting* (c. 1875), whose subject, uncharacteristically, has bones in her arms and hands and a businesslike look on her face, rendered in a crustier manner than usual. Sargent, before he became a slave to his suave and brilliant "paughtraits" (as he called them), was a deft democratic observer, notably of Italian scenes (*Neapolitan Children Bathing*, 1879; *A Venetian Interior*, c. 1880–82; *A Street in Venice*, from the same period), and early in his collecting career Sterling picked them up for little more than five thousand dollars each. Not coming to New York, we have learned, is a Clark Institute showpiece, featured on leaflets and bookmarks—Sargent's exotic *Fumée d'ambre gris* (*Smoke of Ambergris*, c. 1880), wherein the young American coolly flaunted his virtuosity, displaying on the canvas not only the range of whites, in the woman's robes and the plaster wall, which Henry James admired in a review ("The picture is exquisite, a radiant effect of white upon white, of similar but discriminated tones"), but a masterly rendition of the floor, both carpeted and tiled, and an uncanny mimicry, in the censer and the triangular breast ornaments, of the tint and shine of silver.



CÉZANNE *The Card Players*, c. 1890–92 Oil on canvas, 25¾ × 32¼" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Stephen C. Clark, 61.101.1 (Illustration Credit 4.12)



WINSLOW HOMER *West Point, Prouts Neck*, 1900 Oil on canvas, 30¹/₁₆ × 48¹/₈" Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955.7 (Illustration Credit 4.13)

Sterling's big Homers will be the most spectacular visitors to the Metropolitan next May. "Marvel of marvels," he wrote in his journal in 1941, of his newly acquired *West Point, Prouts Neck* (1900), "a big Winslow Homer ... Magnificent in the same class as the best in the Metropolitan \$37,500." While Stephen was winnowing his own substantial Winslow Homer collection down to two middle-sized gems, *A Game of Croquet* (1866) and *Old Mill* (1871), Sterling's enthusiasm for Homer, having once broken through his Eurocentric disposition, gathered momentum; he ended by owning over two hundred works by Homer, more than by any other artist, and as late as 1954 reacquired *Eastern Point* (1900), which he had sold in 1929, to go with its companion, *West Point*. Both unpopulated seascapes are indeed as magnificent as those in the Metropolitan, but *Undertow* (1886) stands in a class by itself, a seascape enveloping four heroic, wave-battered figures, an American trump of a European academic tableau—looser, freer, more realistically life-and-death. "A really great artist," Sterling remarked in his diaries. "I put Winslow Homer as the great artist of ours."



HOMER *Eastern Point*, 1900 Oil on canvas, $30\frac{1}{16} \times 48\frac{1}{8}$ " Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955.6 ([Illustration Credit 4.14](#))



SARGENT *Fumée d'ambre gris* (*Smoke of Ambergris*), c. 1880 Oil on canvas, 54 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 35 $\frac{11}{16}$ " Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955.580 ([Illustration Credit 4.15](#))

Three somewhat shadowy go-betweens intervene between works of art and the gallerygoer: the dealer, the collector, and the

museum curator. *The Clark Brothers Collect*, with its exceptionally weighty catalogue, illuminates the personality and passion of collectors, and provokes reflection on the indispensable nexus of art and money. The public museums, great and small, that are one of America's educational glories house collections expensively assembled by rich men and (*pace*, Isabella Gardner and Baltimore's Cone sisters) women with lofty but not selfless motives. Even a collector and donor as self-effacing as Stephen Clark (he gave anonymously at first, eventually allowed his name to be used but gave without any entangling stipulations, and attached his name to none of the institutions he founded) sought to associate himself with something more enduring than the flux of commerce and human life. Even a few framed prints in a workingman's home express the wish to welcome a touch of transcendence into the perishing quotidian. The Clarks purchased at prices generally in five figures works that, where artistic fashion has not devalued them, would now cost millions, could they be bought at all. Collectors invest in the future, assembling a perpetuation of their best, most discriminating selves.

The Clark Brothers Collect: Impressionist and Early Modern Paintings, at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, June 4–September 4, 2006.



CLAUDE MONET *Rouen Cathedral, Façade*, 1892–94 Oil on canvas, 41¾ × 29"
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1967.1
([Illustration Credit 5.0](#))

Many Monets

ONE GOES to a Monet exhibit curious as to what a bad Monet would look like. For Monet, like Cézanne, is an all-blue chip; together the two are modernism's irreproachable grandfathers. Possessed of tenacity, integrity, and enough philosophy to frame and sustain radical aesthetic ambitions, they always moved forward, continuing to the end to open up a way for the generations following. Under their hands, painting shifted from being a rendition of real objects to being a dramatic record of the act of painting, an act whose traces are brushstrokes, impasto, nervous outlines, noticeable distortions of what the lens of the camera—the sudden mechanical rival that preëmpted sheer representation—would see. Cézanne's distortions occur mostly in his drawing, the dislocated outlines and flattening of perspective; his colors merely display to us, in their sensitive overlapped transparency, the colors we feel are there. Monet, remaining conservative if sketchy in his draftsmanship, took color over the top, into the feverish pinks, crusty golds, darting reds, smoldering mauves, and icy blues he saw in changing light reflected from stacks of grain and the cathedral front at Rouen. Since light and atmosphere so restlessly changed, he did not need to change the position of his easel; the sets of paintings from one chosen spot, or with minimal alteration of perspective, which he began in 1889 and continued through the 1890s into the water-lilies series of the new century, are an unprecedented exercise in picture-making quite modern in its implications, anticipating the numbered canvases of painters like Pollock and Ad Reinhardt, and making art more subjective and yet more scientific than it was before. The painter as roving reporter, in the manner of Delacroix or Turner, or as interviewer, in the form of a portraitist, gives way to the painter as visual seismograph—the recorder of terrestrial effects which become, in the struggle to reduce perception to paint, private effects. Action painting exists in the whirls and daubs of Monet's increasingly abstract impressionism, but renewably, inexhaustibly, since the seen world stimulates it.

Monet in the '90s is an energetically assembled, logically organized show that opened at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts in February and will remain to the end of April; it will then travel on to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Royal Academy of Arts in London. It is a megashow with a purpose: the partial reassembly of the series paintings that were scattered to buyers soon after Monet painted them. He had expressed to his dealer, Charles Durand-Ruel, hopes that some sets might be kept together when sold, but they were rapidly dispersed in the 1890s' ever more lively Monet market. Paul Hayes Tucker, a six-foot-six former all-New England tackle, now an art professor in Boston, used all his muscular powers of research and persuasion to draw more than ninety of the series paintings from their hiding places on five continents over the last four years. Anxious private collectors were consoled with full-sized Polaroids of their borrowed masterpieces; Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, graciously parted with a painting of rocks at Creuse, but President Bush was prohibited by federal law from lending a *Morning on the Seine* that hangs in the White House.

The series as reconstituted in Boston consist of as few as three and as many as ten—of the Rouen Cathedral—and twelve, of the haystacks, determinedly called by Professor Tucker “grainstacks,” as if the word exists in English. (For Monet, the paintings were of *meules*, a word that can also refer to a millstone or a wheel of cheese. For French farmers, *meules* come in two sorts, *meules de foin*, of hay, and the more ambitious and structured *meules de blé*, *blé* being corn or wheat or rye, or a mixture.) Monet painted at least twenty-five *meules de blé* and thirty views of Rouen Cathedral, the angle varying slightly, as well as smaller consecutive studies of a valley of the Creuse River, poppy fields, the Seine, cliffs along the Norman coast, Mount Kolsaas in Norway, and the water-lily pond, with its Japanese bridge, at his home in Giverny.

The show is well set up in the sequential spaces of the Gund Gallery, with paintings hung three inches higher than customary and with larger-than-usual print on the wall labels. A kitschy set of plywood arches obstructs the view of the cathedral fronts, but the other viewers at this well-attended megashow are the real obstruction to giving these subtle and lovely canvases the quiet and distanced contemplation they deserve. Monet's series

paintings offer to take us inside a painter's options and to anatomize, to an extent, his process; but the mobs of bobbing heads and the bumbling, zombified wearers of pedagogical headsets (I even saw a woman tied to her child with the wires of their entwined appreciation apparatus) clutter one's impressions of these almost unpeopled portraits of nature.



MONET *Morning on the Seine, Near Giverny (Mist)*, 1897 Oil on canvas, 36½ × 35" The Kreeger Museum, Washington, D.C. ([Illustration Credit 5.1](#))



MONET *Morning on the Seine, Near Giverny (Mist)*, 1896–97 Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ " Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. Bequest of Miss Sherman Dwight Bliss, 1966.48 ([Illustration Credit 5.2](#))

In a strange way, the most impressive series are those, such as the mornings on the Seine, which vary the least. Of these nine paintings, eight, executed in 1896–97, are identical in composition: the left-hand third of the nearly square canvas is taken up with foreground vegetation; the remaining two-thirds are horizontally divided by the river's bosky horizon, and the water reflects a widening irregular piece of sky, creating symmetrical wings of pallor. This sky, always a morning sky, ranges in tint from pale blue, with hints of cloud and dawn's rose, through the palest of violets to a misty white. The greens of the foreground vegetation go blue with distance; when the day is foggy, they quite fade. In the *Morning on the Seine* in the Kreeger Museum in Washington, D.C., the foreground mass feels like a stage flat beyond whose edge vague mauve shapes inscrutably perform; in the painting from the Mead Art Museum in Amherst,

the atmosphere is thicker yet, and a chalky white dominates the heart of the scene. Such variations, pursued from a fixed easel position, imply the infinite wealth of what can be observed. In no two of the series is the atmosphere the same; in all of the eight (a garish ninth was done in 1898) the tonal modulations of the intervening moisture-laden air, each matched by a subdued reflection in the surface of the Seine, are magisterial. Without a touch of anecdote—no figure, no boat, no individualized tree—an intensely dramatic mood is created, and a palpable space that invites us deep into it. The sensation of peaceful pleasure—indeed, of triumphant harmony—induced by these bulbous blue shapes derives equally from the lofty justice of the depiction and the abstract cunning of the composition's Rorschach-test symmetry.



MONET *Ice Floes (Bennecourt)*, 1893 Oil on canvas, 25½ × 39¾" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 5.3](#))

Another, smaller riverine series, the three *Ice Floes* of 1893–94, makes a similar effect of light-handed grandeur with means even more limited. One painting is done almost entirely in shades of purply blue, another in green, and the third with swatches of springtime yellow. A central island of slender saplings casts down a loose reflection overlaid by brusque horizontal strokes of white that successfully read as ice floes. The sense of gliding motion, and of the glassy weight beneath the sketchy reflections and

daubs of floating ice, anticipates the layered complexity of the water-lilies paintings, but unlike them is intelligible at a glance. The air, so often the real object of Monet's focus, feels cold enough to make us sorry for the hardy *plein-air* painter, yet it has a relenting taste, in the tinge of tree buds and the floes of breaking ice itself. A curious qualitative effect is produced by the hanging of the three slightly different views on one wall: repetition of an image, whether by Monet or Warhol, somehow changes its meaning, deepens it troublingly. Here, a sense of motion in time is evoked. The book of nature has many thin pages, which relentlessly turn; the pages are moments.



MONET *Ice Floes (Morning Haze)*, 1893–94 Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
Philadelphia Museum of Art. Bequest of Mrs. Frank Graham Thomson, 61.48.2
([Illustration Credit 5.4](#))

Compared with these two groups of liquid scenery, the more famous and spectacular cathedral and grainstack series seem to be trying slightly too hard. There is greatness in them, certainly, but perhaps as much in the bold effort as in the achievement. If these are indeed, as has been said, the paintings whereby Monet became a Post-Impressionist and his significance to modern art begins, then he paid a price, in ease and plausibility. The Rouen façade is painted with an uncharacteristic dry, lumpy, accretionary stroke, without fluency; the lacy stone details are laboriously transformed into friable baguettes and dim ribs of

color. Monet's letters from Rouen to his wife, Alice, brim with his struggle: "What I have tackled is enormously difficult but at the same time of really great interest....Each day I add and subtract something I had not even known how to see before. What a difficulty ... I am broken, I can't do any more and I had a night full of bad dreams, something that has never happened to me." He had a nightmare that the cathedral fell on him; it seemed "to be pink or blue or yellow." Though the polychrome suite of façades is interesting, like a row of fancy pastries, we are perhaps too conscious of the willed violence and daring of these transformations. Not a religious man, or a city man, Monet brought to his subject here little of the love that touches his most casual scrubbing-in of sky and vegetation. The cathedral is dissolved not only in the shifting light and weather but in the painter's basic indifference to it as anything but a sunstruck cliff, a contoured excrescence turned into colored dough by this rendering.

The stacks of grain, too, seem a bit alien to Monet; certainly he avoids opportunities to define their structure and scale. A photograph survives of the *meules* at Giverny, and the details of their careful thatching are clear, and one of them has a long ladder left leaning against it, indicating its considerable size. Monet's *meules* might be five feet tall, instead of the twenty or so they actually were; they are squat, pentagonal blobs whose sole purpose is to receive light, which casts some blue shadows but does little to model form. The stacks' solidity is sacrificed to the painter's own evanescent sensations: to Gustave Geffroy he wrote in the fall of 1890,

I'm hard at it, working stubbornly on a series of different effects, but at this time of year the sun sets so fast that I cannot keep up with it....I am becoming a very slow worker, which depresses me, but the further I go, the more I understand that it is imperative to work a great deal to achieve what I seek: "instaneity," the "envelope" above all, the same light spread over everything, and more than ever easy things that come in a single stroke disgust me. Anyway, I'm increasingly obsessed by the need to render what I experience.

Professor Tucker, in his lengthy catalogue text, makes a detailed case for the grainstack series as part of a *fin-de-siècle* French reassertion—after the humiliations of the military defeat by Prussia in 1870–71, chronic government scandals, and its

relative decline among nations in industry and enterprise—of rural virtue, of “*la douce terre de France*.” But, looking at the paintings, it is hard to feel much agrarian pride or, with many of them, the “envelope” of atmosphere Monet strove to capture. The *meules* seem flat pieces of color bedaubed, sometimes, with unconvincing snow. As John Singer Sargent noticed, Monet’s palette contained no black; but white he did have, and he was not above piling it on raw to represent snow, perhaps back in his studio, where he would take the canvases painted on the spot to be finished and “harmonized.” The painting from the Shelburne Museum is especially egregious in its gobs of white, whereas the Metropolitan Museum’s shows snow on the field and none on the stacks. But very similar ingredients in the specimen from the Art Institute of Chicago miraculously succeed; looking at the canvas, one’s eye does pricklingly feel the atmosphere—the air intervening between eye and visible object, the invisible quality of the day and moment. And the sunset *meule* from the Boston museum’s own fine Monet collection is superb in its coloristic venturing; the Turneresque pinks and yellows that do for background and the furious dashes or X’s of orangey red on the shadowy stack’s lower portion indicate a visual event so subtle as to constitute a revelation. Perhaps it was this painting that Wassily Kandinsky saw in 1895 and remembered in 1913 as a seed of abstract painting: “What was absolutely clear to me was the unexpected power, previously hidden from me, of the palette. Painting took on a fabulous strength and splendor. And at the same time, unconsciously, the object was discredited as an indispensable element of the picture.”



MONET *Grainstacks (Mid-day)*, 1890 Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{5}{8}$ " National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1979.16 ([Illustration Credit 5.5](#))



MONET *Grainstacks (End of Day; Autumn)*, 1890–91 Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{5}{8}$ " The Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Foundation, 1933.444 ([Illustration Credit 5.6](#))



MONET *Grainstack (Snow Effect)*, 1890–91 Oil on canvas, 24¾ × 36¾" Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Miss Aimée and Miss Rosamond Lamb, 1970.253 ([Illustration Credit 5.7](#))



MONET *Grainstacks (Winter)*, 1890–91 Oil on canvas, 32¼ × 32½" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 29.100.109 ([Illustration Credit 5.8](#))



MONET *Grainstack*, 1890–91 Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ " The Art Institute of Chicago. Restricted Gift of the Searle Family Trust, 1983.29 ([Illustration Credit 5.9](#))



MONET *Grainstacks (Snow Effect; Sunlight)*, 1890–91 Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ " National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh ([Illustration Credit 5.10](#))

The strenuous lessons in boldness Monet gave himself with the grainstacks paid off in the splendid, breezy series of poplars

which immediately followed. A row of poplars along a curve of the Epte River became, in the spring of 1891, so precious to Monet that, when the village of Limetz decided to auction them off for lumber, Monet attempted to intervene with the mayor and wound up buying them at auction himself, along with a local wood merchant who agreed to let the trees stand a few more months. Their slender linear forms, planted a short distance apart to allow for straight growth, accept the light with much of the weird alchemy of the *meules de blé*, but, in clear silhouette against the sky, never baffle our eye or seem effortfully strange. Wonderfully free, rather, are the purples and yellows Monet saw in the trunks, pictured generally in two rows, a near and a distant, with the distant trunks often reduced to single undulant brushstrokes. The Metropolitan Museum's much-reproduced painting of four backlit trunks, as severely composed as a Barnett Newman, distills the elegance of all the series, a linear grace—learned, in part, from Japanese prints—which returns a few years later in the *Spring Meadow* group, the poplars and their shadows more wavy. In the Epte series, the brushstrokes fly, indicating wind in one canvas but everywhere delineating space, an air now blue-green, now violet-gray, but permeable and fresh throughout. Always at the feet of the poplars stands the mirroring water of the river, bringing into the pictures that element of liquid reflection so dear to the painter, as if it symbolized the flowing complexity of our impressions, while yet posing a duplication of them. The results are lovely, and stingingly fresh. The writer Octave Mirbeau, after seeing these paintings, wrote Monet that he wanted to hug him: "Never did any artist render anything equal to it."



MONET *Poplars*, 1891 Oil on canvas, 32¼ × 32⅝" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 29.100.110 ([Illustration Credit 5.11](#))

The paintings of the Norman coast, done in 1896–97, are less charming and invigorating than the poplar series, though they rather recklessly extend freedom of color. The four of the headland of the Petit Ailly flatten the terrain into murky patches devoid of depth, and suppress into formlessness the little house in the foreground of each. They have a new kind of monumentality, and approach the environmental largeness that the immense water-lily studies will achieve. Monet's Norman origins gave this landscape special meaning for him, and an elegiac undertone to his paintings here. But the three paintings of the Custom House at Varengeville satisfy our curiosity as to what a bad Monet looks like. Pastel flecks in half-hearted pointillism; a haze of wistful formlessness; an evenness of attention devoid of accent; the slickly unshadowed sweetness of Sunday painting ever since. The

necessary complement to Monet's preternatural receptivity, the stout picture-making faculty that not even an Impressionist can do without, here abandoned him, perhaps in his sheer pleasure at being on this breezy headland, so high above the sea.



MONET *Headland of the Petit Ailly*, 1896–97 Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ " Private collection ([Illustration Credit 5.12](#))

So big in reality, the Normandy vista seems small in the rendering; whereas those pilgrims who travel to the artist's estate at Giverny are surprised by how modest the grounds and the epic lily pond are. The artist's little pond, in the final series of this gem of a show, floods his canvas with shades of green, while the arc of the bridge above the reflecting water, suspended in air, presides above profusion and holds us firm above immersion. The eye welcomes its mathematical curve, abrupt as a Zen riddle, amid a wealth of fluid appearance. As Monet continued for the rest of his life to paint the water lilies, he left out the helpful bridge, and modern art, in its dominant tendencies, has walked on water since.



MONET *Headland of the Petit Ailly*, 1896 Oil on canvas, 28¾ × 36¾" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 5.13](#))

Monet in the '90s: The Series Paintings, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, February 7–April 29, 1990.



EDGAR DEGAS *Steep Coast*, c. 1890–92 Pastel, 18⅞ × 21½" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 6.0](#))

Degas Out-of-Doors

NO MATTER HOW the wind shifts, Degas's ship sails on. For those whose conservative tastes favor representation, Degas was the most scrupulous draftsman of the Impressionists—the slowest to cast off the spell of academic training, with its tedious but useful copying from museum masterpieces and “the antique”; the drawing in even Degas's oldest, most furiously rapt pastels of nude bathers is firmly correct. For those whose tastes ask of an artist a certain individual violence—a personal expressionism that creates rather than imitates nature—Degas presents a model restlessness and willingness to experiment. His formal manners belong to the nineteenth century, but his artistic ruthlessness and freedom to the twentieth. His eccentric perspectives, his truncated compositions, his increasingly daring juxtapositions of color make us reflect, in modern style, upon the operations of perception—or, more precisely, upon the synthetic tensions that occur when a vision in three dimensions is reduced to a two-dimensional colored surface.

The exhibition *Degas Landscapes*, now on view at the Metropolitan Museum, surprises us with its very title, for Degas is a painter of closely observed and intimately felt interiors—theatres and living rooms and *salles de bain*. His early mythological panoramas savor of airless studio assembly, and even the racehorses in his pictures partake of human enclosure and control. Man's presence is not a mere incident in Degas's world, as it is in Monet's and the late Cézanne's, but pivotal and ubiquitous. Yet as a young man he took the requisite tour of Italy, and among the souvenirs of his three years there brought back little *plein-air* landscapes and some characteristically painstaking pencil renderings of Mount Vesuvius and the landscape outside Rome. He filled sketchbooks with scenic notations and descriptions, we read in Richard Kendall's handsome and thorough exhibition catalogue. Already proficient in portraiture, Degas painted a number of small oils on paper, of which *Italian Landscape Seen Through an Arch* (1856) is one of the earliest and

most finished. It has, in its slight tilt, a pinch of drama, but is basically tame. The stucco or stone arch is well represented; the green landscape seen though it is indistinct and blackened. A watercolor sketch from the same period—in the Louvre, and not exhibited, though reproduced in Kendall's book—captures more charmingly the sense of a sunny outdoors seen from within. *The Convent of Santa Trinità dei Monti Seen from a Tower of the Villa Medici* (c. 1859–60) is *plein-air*, all right, as its title announces, and has a radiant sky, but its largest feature is a cloud that looks implausible. With all the puffy, boiling, streaking, evanescent variety of natural nebulosity, most any brushstroke will answer to some heavenly formation—not these, however. One looks perhaps too earnestly over this first set of landscape studies, along the first wall of the exhibit, for something to distinguish them from those of a thousand other skilled young painters; they have a calm and dutiful air, and the calm is perhaps the Degas touch. Not until he returns to France, however, and copies a small landscape section of Veronese's *Supper at Emmaus* do we find, in a blobby, chalky unfinished bit of foreground in the right corner, a patch of canvas that somehow says "Degas."



DEGAS *Italian Landscape Seen Through an Arch*, 1856 Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 14½" × 12⅝" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 6.1](#))

The next wall of the exhibit shows a number of landscapes with horses, a motif he would pursue off and on for much of his life, in wax statuettes as well as in paintings and pastels. Horses have always seemed to me a poor subject for a post-Géricault painter; there is too much drawing to them, their colors are drab, and their nervous animation and old mythic resonances threaten to run off with the painting. A picture with a horse in it tends to become anecdotal. *At the Races* (1860–62) is fussily full of background figures and shows, in the jockeys and the starter in the foreground, a gestural animation foreshadowing marvellous Degas theatrics to come. Still, the horses' many legs overanimate the painting's lower half, and in two later horse landscapes,

Leaving for the Hunt (c. 1863–65) and *The Morning Ride* (1865–68), Degas has left some of the legs unfinished, or cut off by tall grasses. *Leaving for the Hunt*, as landscape, manages to subdue its many lively details of horses and red-coated riders to an enveloping atmosphere; we feel the transparent space occupied by the scratchy and (in the case of a row of trees in the middle distance) obliterated details, in the heavy morning shadows beneath a pale-orange sky. *The Morning Ride*, quite unfinished, gives up on its four foreground equestrians and lets the eye travel to the boldly outlined headland in the distance—the first, perhaps, of the massive earth formations that are figured forth in the monotypes, completed between 1890 and 1892, which are Degas’s stunning contributions to the art of landscape painting.



DEGAS *Leaving for the Hunt*, c. 1863–65 Oil on canvas, 27 × 34¾" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 6.2](#))

Long before the monotypes, while summering in Normandy in 1869, he achieved his first triumphant rapprochement with landscape, a series of more than forty small pastels, radiant in their predominant blues and browns, of the local beaches and coastal hills. Through mists of chalky color the elemental sand

and sea and grass emerge with an effect of Turner-esque burning but without Turner's agitation and rather obtrusive optical doctrines. Degas's horizon is generally flat and his laying on of tones as level and dispassionate as this verbal notation from that summer:

Villers-sur-Mer, sun-set, cold and dull orange-pink, whitish green, neutral, sea like a sardine's back and clearer than the sky. Line of the seashore brown, the first pools of water reflecting the orange, the second reflecting the upper sky; in front, coffee-coloured sand, rather sombre.

Though modest and quasi-scientific in attempt, the best of these small pictures—*Beside the Sea*, *Houses Beside the Sea*, *Cliffs Beside the Sea*, *Seascape at Sunset*, the cloudy-sky *Beach at Low Tide*—show Degas using pastels to get a light-soaked effect more glowing and ethereal than oil paints could create. He does not in every instance overcome the chief problem of pastels, a glancingness and mere prettiness present in, say, *Fishing Boats Moored at the Entrance to a Port* and the sunnier *Beach at Low Tide*. *On the Cliff* arrests us with its steep upward mass of grassy hill abruptly thrust into a concave piece of clear blue sky, sky that looks stark and unreal until we step back and see it resolve, with the blotches of fuscous green that wander up the hillside, into a rectangle of perfect high summer in its elemental duotone. There is not a speck of shade in sight, while flecks of white give the slope a small population of walkers, feminine in the main. A delicate justice of touch co-exists here with a brutality of composition that feels gigantesque, and that prepares us for the mighty color monotypes occupying the next museum room.



DEGAS *Beside the Sea*, 1869 Pastel, 11¾ × 18" Musée d'Orsay, Paris ([Illustration Credit 6.3](#))

On the fourth wall of the first room, however, we should observe the small black monotypes Degas executed in the late 1870s, in their varying aspects of tonal subtlety (*Factory Smoke*, a charming subject) and deliberate crudity (*Rest in the Field*, tarry as a Dubuffet). Monotype's curious technique, which consists of applying ink or pigment to a smooth plate of zinc or copper and taking a single print (with a fainter second, called the cognate, sometimes obtained), appealed to Degas, perhaps because it liberated him from his academic compulsion toward definition and refinement—an inveterate experimenter and tinkerer in his studio, he would take years reworking oil canvases, and often added multiple pieces of paper to gouaches and pastels. The substance on the metal plate remains wet and open to adjustment until the print is taken, with a result not strictly foreseeable. Monotype can yield a shadowy richness far more painterly in texture than engraving or crayoned lithograph. The horizontal serenity of Degas's seaside pastels is replaced, in these little inky landscapes, by a higher horizon and a nocturnal darkness, the visible marks of rag, finger, and brush handle combining, on occasion, to produce a surprising sense of depth and mass. The pastels, begun if not finished on the spot, stemmed from a tranquil seeing; the monotypes come from a brooding studio

struggle with a recalcitrant, slippery medium.



DEGAS *Factory Smoke*, 1877–79 Monotype, 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ " The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1982.1025 ([Illustration Credit 6.4](#))



DEGAS *Autumn Landscape*, 1890 Monotype and pastel, 12 × 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ " Museum of

DEGAS'S large color monotypes of 1890–92 are as well documented, in his own correspondence and in the later reminiscences of companions, as a military campaign. Daniel Halévy recalled Degas's announcing to him that he had accumulated twenty-one landscapes, describing them casually as "the fruits of my journeys this summer. I stood at the door of the railway carriage, and looked around vaguely." Asked, then, if the works could be described as "states of mind," Degas replied, "States of eyes. We do not use such pretentious language." Halévy elsewhere produced a poetic recollection of Degas

on long train journeys during which he had tried to rest his eyes. Sitting in the corner of a carriage and continually looking, looking as well as he could—how could he *not* look? the entire occupation of his life was in the spoils of his looking—he had glimpsed, guessed at, perceived valleys, trees, rocks, plains, and back in our Montmartre, dreaming of everything that had taken his fancy, he had taken up his boards, his pastels, working in secret and successfully fixing his memories.

Degas in those years travelled to Belgium, Normandy, the Pyrenees, and Switzerland, but it was a visit in 1890 to the château of Georges Jeanniot, in the village of Diénay in Burgundy, that inspired the first outpour of color monotypes. According to Jeanniot forty years later, in his *Souvenirs sur Degas*, Degas, arriving at Diénay in a horse-drawn carriage, demanded immediately after the welcoming meal to be taken to Jeanniot's studio. Satisfying himself that the requisite tools and smooth plates were available, he cried, "I have been wanting for so long to make a series of monotypes!" and set to work, as memorably remembered by the enchanted host:

Once supplied with everything he needed, without waiting, without allowing himself to be distracted from his idea, he started. With his strong but beautifully-shaped fingers, his hand grasped the objects, the tools of his genius, handling them with a strange skill and little by little one could see emerging on the metal surfaces a small valley, a sky, white houses, fruit trees with black branches, birches and oaks, ruts full of water after the recent downpour, orangey clouds dispersing in an animated sky, above the red and green earth.

All this fell into place, coming together, the tones setting each other off and the handle of the brush traced clear shapes in the fresh colour.

These lovely things seemed to be created without the slightest effort, as if the model was in front of him.



DEGAS *Russet Landscape*, 1890 Monotype, 11¾ × 15¾" Detroit Institute of Arts. Founders Society purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund, in honor of Ellen Sharp, 2001.69 ([Illustration Credit 6.6](#))



DEGAS *Landscape in the Mountains*, 1890 Monotype, 12 × 15¾" Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Purchased with funds provided by the Garrett Corporation, M.83.71 ([Illustration Credit 6.7](#))

The passage is prominently quoted in the exhibit, and in truth the monotypes do place us in the presence of creation. The artist kneading, scrubbing, scratching, smearing earth formations into existence is our dominant impression; most awesome and astonishing are those monotypes not retouched with pastel. Without benefit of pastel refinement and elaboration, the 1890 monotypes display a Degas more savage, abstract, visionary, and primitive than we would have thought existed. *Landscape in the Mountains* in three brown-green chunks studded with oval finger-dabbings; *Burgundy Landscape* with its gouged stripes of wet brown in suggestion of plowed furrows; *Village in l'Estérel* and *A Wooded Landscape* dominated by dark-green stains too opaque to yield representational significance; *Le Cap Hornu*, with its lion-yellow couchant shape wearing a mane of dull green; the scrabbled stripes of *L'Estérel*; the oleaginous gray speckles sweeping across *Squall in the Mountains*; the tawny swabbings of *Russet Landscape*; the floating galactic shape of *A Lake in the Pyrenees*; the ochre lump of *Mountain Effect*, in an ocean of wavy scrubblings: these are the work of an artist possessed, prophesying an "action painting" a half-century in the future. *Green Landscape* is as liquid and untrammelled as a Frankenthaler; *L'Estérel* as numinously hovering as a Rothko; *Russet Landscape* as vigorously, evenly worked as a Pollock. Not that such anticipations are needed to validate them; these near-abstract Degases justify themselves in their sheer energy and strange beauty. The image-making activity is here naked and accidental, like the processes of geology, and generates in parallel the forms, bizarre and inevitable, of the earth.



DEGAS *An Island in the Sea*, 1890 Monotype and pastel, 11¾ × 15¾" Louvre, Paris ([Illustration Credit 6.8](#))

Of the more than twenty monotypes that Degas displayed at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in November of 1892, only one—*Burgundy Landscape*—was not retouched in pastel. In some cases, the pastel quite covers the original; in others, it points up and restructures only sections. Compared with the raw monotypes, the pastels are relatively conventional and intelligible; nevertheless, they are strikingly original, bold, and fresh—views of landscapes but also meditations on topography. Influenced by the flattened perspectives of Japanese art, and intended, in this particular suite, to compete with Monet’s sensational series of grainstacks and poplars (exhibited at Durand-Ruel the year before), these works of Degas are both “states of mind” and “states of vision.” An admirer, evidently, of the memory-training techniques of Lecoq de Boisbaudran, and no doubt acquainted with the philosopher Bergson’s explorations of memory—which were so powerfully to influence Proust—Degas repeatedly emphasized the importance of drawing from memory. He told Jeannot, “It is very good to copy what one sees; it is much better to draw what you can’t see any more but in your memory,” and claimed that if he had an art school he would put the model on one floor and have the students paint on another. (The plan

suggests a lot of thunderingly well-used staircases.) No sketches or notations jotted down in his travels by railway and carriage through Burgundy or the Pyrenees preceded Degas's monotype-based landscapes; in the dozen years since his attentive, luminous pastels of Normandy, he had learned how to dream the earth into being.

An imaginary vista like *An Island in the Sea* tells us more about the idea of island-ness than might an actual scene, where an island looks like a peninsula or a strip of sunset. In the same way, a map of an imaginary terrain is more maplike than a real map. Degas's amoebic orange shape, under a similarly grasping orange cloud, takes hold of the mind. Recarved in the crumbly radiance of pastels, the mountainous forms of various landscapes acquire different sizes and auras, from the original monotype to the cognate print. In one doubled set, a gloriously vague and golden wheatfield (*Wheatfield and Green Hill*) becomes on the second try a tidy rectangular violet field of flax (*The Field of Flax*); we like it less well, having become acclimated to Degas's world of recklessly tinted wilderness and unnameable forms. Even a volcano (*Vesuvius*) seems diminished in its specificity—a mere local postcard.

It is not surprising, as Degas remolded his monotype blobs, bestowing upon them his characteristic roundedness, that his plastic imagination would revert to human forms he had mastered; he shapes a slender isthmus to resemble a foreshortened ballerina's leg (*Rocky Coast*), and jestingly extracts a pneumatic, reclining nude from the bulbous protrusions of *Steep Coast*, her red hair cascading, petrified, down the cliff. Metamorphosis is what nature is all about. Kendall, in his scrupulous examination of Degas's cultural context, nominates as a likely influence upon the monotypes the writer Victor Hugo, who enjoyed additional celebrity as a painter. Like the Degas of the monotypes, Hugo—whose drawings had been exhibited as recently as 1888—produced topographical scenes from his travels, teased random blots of ink into semblances, and included fingerprints in his free-form compositions.



DEGAS *Wheatfield and Green Hill*, 1890–92 Monotype and pastel, 9¾ × 13¾"
 Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena, California. Norton Simon Foundation,
 F.1983.02.2.P ([Illustration Credit 6.9](#))



DEGAS *The Field of Flax*, 1890 Monotype and pastel, 9¾ × 13¾" Private
 collection ([Illustration Credit 6.10](#))

After the burst of fruitful violence that fed into the 1892 show at Durand-Ruel, Degas withdrew from landscape as such. The third and final room of the exhibition at the Metropolitan hangs some large canvases executed in 1896–98 at Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme, a village in Picardy where Degas had spent holidays with his family as a child, and where his brother René rented a house three decades later. The oils are townscapes more than landscapes and, perhaps partly owing to Degas's troubled eyesight, are muddy in color and often left unfinished. A number, heavily outlined, seem deliberate exercises in perspective, and point up what a drag drawing is upon painting, with its net of lines. After the confident color explosions of the pastelled monotypes, these laborious canvases seem dreary and tentative, though not without, in the *View of Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme* and *Houses at the Foot of a Cliff*, a melancholy impressiveness. There is a suggestion, in the piling-on of cubes and the predominance of orange and green, of Cézanne, and even, in the quasi-primitive *Return of the Herd*, of Gauguin, but nothing like the vitality of either painter, or of the sun-soaked landscapes of an earlier Degas. We end with several paintings in which landscape figures potently as background; the pinkish tints of *Racehorses in a Landscape* (1894) echo from sweated horse-flank to mountaintops dipped in red glow, and the Fauve colors of the swirling figures of *Russian Dancers* (1899) extend into the vivid background. Wherever you look in nature, his outdoor exercises taught Degas, color is in motion.



DEGAS *Rocky Coast*, c. 1890–92 Monotype and pastel, 12 × 16" Museum Ludwig, Cologne ([Illustration Credit 6.11](#))



DEGAS *View of Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme*, 1896–98 Oil on canvas, 20 × 21" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Robert Lehman Collection,

1975.1.167 ([Illustration Credit 6.12](#))

Degas Landscapes, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, January 21–April 3, 1994.



ÉDOUARD VUILLARD *Interior with Woman Sewing (L'Aiguillée)*, 1893 Oil on canvas, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 12 $\frac{11}{16}$ " Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, B.A. 1929, 1983.7.16 ([Illustration Credit 7.0](#))

An Intimate Whirlwind

ÉDOUARD VUILLARD is generally counted among modernism's disappointments. The note of disappointment is struck by even so non-judgmental a source as the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, which in the second of its two sentences on the artist says that his early paintings of home life "have a brooding tension that was supplanted by works of a lighter, more decorative vein after 1900." Like De Chirico and Kandinsky, he lost it, that old brooding tension we love so well, in a fussy middle-aged pedantry, a mistaken attempt at refinement and broadening. Vuillard suffers from comparison with his close contemporary, lifelong friend, and fellow Nabi Bonnard; as Bonnard aged, he moved south to the Côte d'Azur and got wilder and freer in his coloring, giving modernism some of its most luscious masterpieces, breakfast tables and bathing women painted with a playful, incandescent fury that, after so much false fury in these intervening decades, still startles and moves us. Vuillard, on the other hand, stayed in Paris, continued living with his mother, got taken up by monied people, painted society portraits and detailed interiors of the Louvre and big decorative panels and opera scenery, and in his increasingly chalky, representational style revoked the arresting, willful distortions by which his Post-Impressionist generation, under the influence of Gauguin and the Symbolists, had sought to transcend what Maurice Denis called "the stupidities of effortful imitation" and "the false witness of naturalism."

Ergo, let us look only at the early work, says the guiding spirit behind *The Intimate Interiors of Édouard Vuillard*, a show of more than a hundred works from the years between 1890 and 1900, which originated in Houston in 1989 and, after a spell in Washington, has come to roost in the Robert E. Blum Gallery of the hospitable if not exactly handy Brooklyn Museum. For those who have been conditioned by MoMA's recent Cubism blockbuster to enjoy small, brownish canvases—or cardboards, to specify Vuillard's favorite medium in his intimist phase—the

show offers some subtle delights. “Charming,” the adjective that smallish and narrowly focused shows normally elicit, somehow fails to apply. Except in his lithographs, Vuillard is rarely charming, in a way that Bonnard almost always is. Something sombre, thoughtful, and clotted in Vuillard keeps the charm from bubbling up, and his later works, executed with a certain resolved lightness and dash, as by a man who has put his problems behind him, have failed to charm posterity.



VUILLARD *Woman Mending*, 1891–92 Oil on cardboard, 11¼ × 9¼" (oval)
Indianapolis Museum of Art. Samuel Josefowitz Collection ([Illustration Credit 7.1](#))

The smallness and roughness of many of the works on exhibit, whose underlying cardboard is often allowed to register as a dominant color, suggest a private purpose in their creation, only a shade more public than the notebook sketches Vuillard was in the habit of making. Though Vuillard, born in 1868 of a retired soldier and a much younger woman who became in her widowhood a corset maker, was exhibiting by 1891, and by 1892 received his first commission for decorative work—panels of canvas to be set into the walls of a private or public building—it is hard to believe any professional hope was attached to daubs as small and sketchy as *The Seamstress* (1891) and *Workers at the Chiffonnier* (1892) or as scrubbily unfinished as *A Seamstress* (1892–93). But in this same period, out of this same subject matter—Vuillard lived in crowded quarters with his mother the *corsetière* and his sister, her assistant, surrounded by the patterned materials and feminine minions of the garment trade—emerge denser and more finished works like *Seamstress* (1892–95), *The Flowered Dress* (1891), *Interior with Woman Sewing* (or *L'Aiguillée*, 1893), and, the most ambitious and complex, *Interior* (or *L'Atelier*, 1893), in which dotted patches are arrayed like swatches of cloth to create slices of space in which his human figures are almost lost. A peculiarity (a charm, one might almost say) of Vuillard's interiors is the elusiveness of their human inhabitants: one looks quite a while at *The Landing* (1891) before realizing that the patch of black beneath the arabesque of the stairs is a woman, and at *Child at a Window* (1901) before seeing the child, and at *At the Window* (c. 1900) before becoming aware of the large motherly shadow in the foreground, and at *Woman in Blue* (1893) before seeing the second face and figure in the crook of the amazingly blue arm. The wallpaper in a Vuillard interior is often more vivid than the figures, and some of the figures, such as the hunched-over sister in *Mother and Sister of the Artist* (c. 1893), seem to be trying to melt into the wallpaper.



VUILLARD *Interior (L'Atelier)*, 1893 Oil on millboard panel, $12\frac{1}{2} \times 14\frac{15}{16}$ " Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. Purchased with the Drayton Hillyer Fund, 1938.15 ([Illustration Credit 7.2](#))

This last painting is peremptorily called, by the show's wall commentary, Vuillard's best-known painting, and occasions quite a lot of psychoanalysis in the meticulous but faintly anxious catalogue text by Elizabeth Wynne Easton. *Mother and Sister* is one of several that seem in their configurations to explore "the perplexing theme of his mother's dominance and his sister's submission" and to reflect "an unpleasant, even agonizing, relationship between mother and daughter." Vuillard's formidable mother, whose manufacture of corsets was the family mainstay until his commissions allowed her to retire by the end of the century, is usually presented frontally, at the solid center of things, and his sister, Marie, who escaped the family nest in 1893 by marrying her brother's close friend and fellow painter Ker-Xavier Roussel, is often on the edge of definition, melting into shadow or huddling deferentially. Ms. Easton makes much of the "claustrophobic" qualities of the family interiors—the crowding wallpaper, the enlarged bureaus, the steep and unstable

perspectives. Yet this viewer remained unconvinced that any psychological message was delivered beyond the unintentional one of the painter's preferences and avoidances. Vuillard's eyes frequently rested upon his mother, who shared his dwellings until her death when he was sixty, and sometimes he painted her as a comforting breadth of stripes (*Woman Sweeping*, 1899) or as sewing a swath of stripes (*Madame Vuillard Sewing*, c. 1895)—one of the most cheerful of the small cardboards, which happens to suggest, with its red stripes and white-flowered blue wallpaper, an American flag.



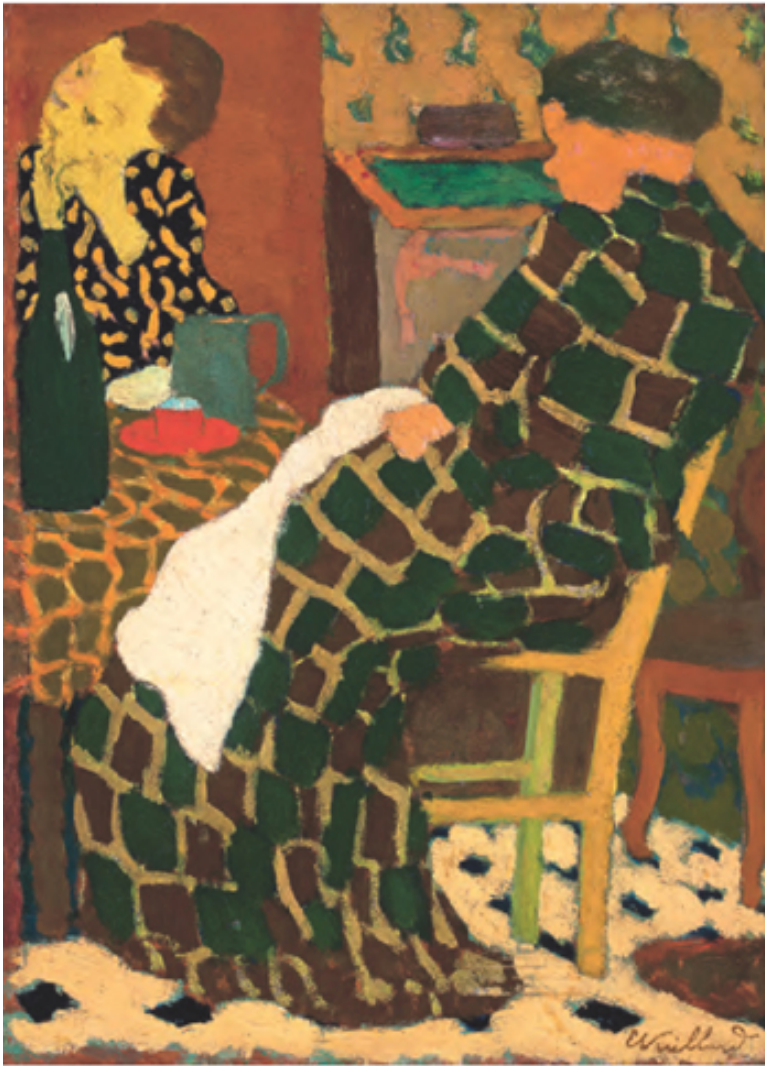
VUILLARD *Mother and Sister of the Artist*, c. 1893 Oil on canvas, 18¼ × 22¼" The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Saidie A. May, 141.1934
([Illustration Credit 7.3](#))

Suggestiveness was part of the aesthetic credo of the *Revue blanche*, with which Vuillard was early associated and whose central figure was Mallarmé. Mallarmé claimed, "Once an object is named, three-quarters of the satisfaction which the poem has to offer is lost. The poet should *suggest it*: that is his aim." And Vuillard's early work is certainly shy of naming, of undue and insistent definition. But an artistic idea more crucial to him,

surely, and to the group of young painters who called themselves the Nabi, after the Hebrew word for “prophet,” finds expression in the famous statement issued by another Nabi, Maurice Denis: “Remember that before it is a warhorse, a naked woman, or a trumpery anecdote, a painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” Though some of the faces and poses in Vuillard’s domestic scenes recall those of Edvard Munch, implied psychological content never dominates the Frenchman’s work as it does the Norwegian’s: angst may creep in, but it is not the topic. The morose downward tilt of Vuillard’s lamplit faces more than once reminded me of the foreshortened physiognomies drawn by the great Polish writer Bruno Schulz, who was also an art teacher and draftsman of considerable expressive skill: Schulz’s drawings convey an intense impression of *shyness*, of avoidance. Like Vuillard, he was a lifelong bachelor—one of art’s monks.



VUILLARD *Madame Vuillard Sewing*, c. 1895 Oil on panel, 7½ × 9⅞" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 7.4](#))



VUILLARD *Mother and Sister of the Artist*, c. 1893 Oil on panel, 14 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
Private collection ([Illustration Credit 7.5](#))

Vuillard's journals, which were released to public scrutiny ten years ago, forty years after his death in 1940, have disappointed those who hoped to reap detailed insight into the tensions of his family or of his inner and sexual life. Of the latter, hardly the most furtive trace remains. A few paintings from 1891, not in this exhibition, show a young woman in bed, tucked in chastely like a

child, and some early-twentieth-century works, as Vuillard attempted to reclaim the traditions of classic French art, do limn nudes, but there is nothing like the ardent and zealous visual embrace Degas, another resolute bachelor, exerted upon the female form. The one nude in Brooklyn, *Seated Nude* from 1892, shows Vuillard in his most cardboardy mood, his interest focused on the triangle of yellow light on the squatting figure's back. She is, like the clothed workingwomen of his mother's shop and the female figures posed around the family table, merely "a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."

The most revelatory passage from Vuillard's journals which Ms. Easton quotes is a long reflection by him on the objects in his room, seen as he lies in bed:

The ceiling painted white, the ornament in the middle, vaguely 18th-century arabesques, the mirrored armoire opposite, the grooves, the molding of the woodwork, of the window, their proportions, the *curtains*, the chair in front of them with its back of carved wood, the paper on the wall, the knobs of the open door, glass and copper, the wood of the bed, the wood of the screen, the hinges, my clothes at the foot of the bed; the four elegant green leaves in a pot, the inkwell, the books, the curtains of the other window, the walls of the court through it, the differences of perspective through the two windows, one with a little patch of sky parallel to the window, in the other, making a perpendicular angle, the impression that results from only that corner...

Such a visual inventory, as his meditation continues, removes aesthetic prejudice and the idea of "bad taste," and leads to the understanding of the world that was "the goal originally pointed out by those who first spoke of the modern and of modernity." Then,

in the middle of all these objects, I was astonished to see Mama enter in a blue peignoir with white stripes.... The arrival of Mama was surprising—a living person. For the painter, the differences of shapes, of forms, were interest enough.

It is very like a Vuillard painting—the human being just perceptibly distinguished from the patterns and angles of the décor. As with the larger and more luminous interiors of Vuillard's American disciple Fairfield Porter, one looks in vain at the human figures and faces for some expression of intenser being, a residue of the painter's interest in another personality.

But no, the bodies with their colored clothes take up space, reflect light, impassively, with the same muteness as the other things.

How shy, how detached, how desexed was Vuillard? To judge from some of the reminiscences collected by John Russell in the book *Vuillard* (New York Graphic Society, 1971), which was prompted by the last Vuillard retrospective show in North America, he was noticeably depressive, with a slow-speaking taciturnity broken by erratic outbursts of temper. Thadée Natanson, one of the publishers of the *Revue blanche* and the husband of Misia Natanson, the woman who above all seems to have sparked Vuillard's interest, speaks of the warm springs of Vuillard's nature, fed by domestic intimacy, being mixed with a chilly *ennui*:

The pale, shy, red-haired youth, deprived of almost everything, introverted, undecided, anxious about the future and tormented by his own ardent nature, felt himself a burden even more to himself than to his family, and gave way to depression.... And yet as his intelligence grew stronger, he succeeded in controlling depression by means of thought.... As a lad, he would become absorbed in contemplation of the windows opening on to the street, or the repetitive pattern of wallpaper.



VUILLARD *Self-Portrait*, 1892 Oil on cardboard, $8\frac{1}{4} \times 11$ " Private collection
([Illustration Credit 7.6](#))

Natanson's niece, Annette Vaillant, anticipates in retrospect how "Monsieur Vuillard—with his round-toed boots, his soft collar, his slender bow-tie, the clean smell of his honey-colored beard—will bend over to kiss me before, once again, he starts to clean his paintbrushes." She remembers the vigorous Madame Vuillard "playing a polka at full speed on her unpretentious upright piano," and, like a child repeating what she has been told, reports how Vuillard "was happy to be with the mother he worshipped in her well-polished paradise." But she also lets slip a recollection of

“his outbursts of anger” in which, “losing all self-control, he would utter terrible words.” She sweetly adds, “I think the saints must be like that, too.”

As with Kafka, an aura of sanctity, of respect for the toll that ordinary living took on him, tinges his friends’ reminiscences: Claude Roger-Marx, whose *Vuillard: His Life and Work* came out in Paris in 1946, recalls:

Words rise slowly out of the depths of his nature, painfully even, but they are the right ones. He regulates and explains them by gestures. His speech is broken by frequent intervals, so anxious is he to express his true meaning. There is a questioning charm in his regard and his melancholy smile. He twists his fingers nervously or raises his hand to his brow. Nothing passes within his consciousness which is without weight and significance. The atmosphere seems cleansed of every impurity and around us reigns only calm and disinterestedness.

A touch of allowance, of forbearance, lingers in such a description, and Roger-Marx’s fond and scrupulous account, composed throughout the Occupation, ends with regret that “with so many great endowments—and no one since Degas and Lautrec could boast so many—Vuillard should have maintained [his] reserve.... What then restrained him?—was it fear of the subject, a dread of ridicule, a want of confidence in himself?” In a letter of 1897 to Maurice Denis, Vuillard wrote, “As for that plenitude of the will, that fullness of effort which you speak of, I can imagine what it’s like. But, whether from a curable infirmity or an innate weakness of character, I don’t often experience it.” He goes on to speak of “a moment when everything turned to ashes,” his creativity thenceforth subject to “a sort of intimate whirlwind.” He tells the theory-loving Denis, “The area in which I was quite certain of anything got smaller and smaller,” and “To sum up, I have a horror (or rather, an absolute terror) of general ideas that I have not arrived at by myself.”



VUILLARD *Misia and Thadée Natanson*, c. 1897 Oil on paper mounted on canvas,
41 × 28" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 7.7](#))



VUILLARD *Annette's Lunch*, 1900 Oil on cardboard, 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ " Musée de l'Annonciade, Saint-Tropez (Illustration Credit 7.8)

Such a skeptical horror is honorable and fruitful enough, but in Vuillard's case it was accompanied by some temperamental inability or psychic infirmity which put a premature ceiling on his talent, much as his flaming red hair early gave way to baldness, and his honey-colored beard turned white. As those who venture to Brooklyn discover in the Vuillard show's final rooms, even such modest rays of vitality as his sister's bearing a small daughter, and the social emanations of the *Revue blanche* set dominated by the lively Misia Natanson, opened Vuillard up; his interiors became sunnier, more spacious, and, where his tiny niece Annette is depicted, whimsically affectionate. Such child-centered canvases as *Annette's Lunch* and *Child in a Room* (both 1900) have a breadth and variety of texture a world away from the sullen domestic interiors of the bygone decade. A child's world of lush carpets and enchanted window-glimpses is conjured up; *Child at a Window* (1901) brings us to the verge of Matisse, in the severe rectangles of its flat design and in its schematic, playful off-center spot of bright red. Ms. Easton cites to Vuillard's credit that "the complex spatial role of Vuillard's dots and patterns may have inspired Picasso in his Synthetic Cubist images of 1914" and that "Picasso and Braque could have taken their cue for their experiments in collage from Vuillard's areas of unpainted canvas." But it also has been cited to his discredit that he himself did not proceed to Cubism but instead retreated into

what Roger-Marx calls “a wish to unlearn all he had been taught by Gauguin, the Impressionists and Degas.”

Vuillard's alleged love for Misia Natanson has a shaky factual base in her autobiographical account of how, once while walking in the woods, she tripped and “Vuillard grabbed her, looked deep into her eyes, and burst into sobs.” But the paintings grouped as “Homages to Misia Natanson” do appear relatively generous in scale and animated in tone. In *Misia and Vallotton in the Dining Room, Rue Saint-Florentin* (1899), Vuillard is excited enough not only to render the room's busy décor but to individualize the two human figures, in Lautrec-like caricature. In *The Red Peignoir* (c. 1897), he stabbed with the reverse end of his brush in the wet paint to further search out the curves of her coiled hair and the odalisque form of her reclining, sumptuously swathed back. A large and elegant painting not in the catalogue, *La Table de toilette* (or *Dans les fleurs*, 1895), perhaps the most impressive in the show, merges three female figures in the linear elaborations of wallpaper and flowers and achieves, with this characteristic suppression of distinctly human presence, something of a philosophical statement: all things merge. In Vuillard's recessive sensibility, the long theological and Romantic exaggeration of human importance found little intuitive support. His sense of reality as one big *nature morte* strikes the modern note, and leaves it ominously hanging.



VUILLARD *Child in a Room*, 1900 Oil on cardboard, 17¼ × 22¾" The Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1180
([Illustration Credit 7.9](#))



Vuillard *Misia and Vallotton in the Dining Room, Rue Saint-Florentin*, 1899 Oil on cardboard, $28\frac{3}{8} \times 20\frac{1}{16}$ " Private collection ([Illustration Credit 7.10](#))



Vuillard *La Table de toilette (Dans les fleurs)*, 1895 Oil on canvas, 25½ × 44¾"
Private collection ([Illustration Credit 7.11](#))

The Intimate Interiors of Édouard Vuillard, at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, May 18–July 30, 1990.



Gustav Klimt *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, 1907 Oil, silver, and gold on canvas, 55½ × 55½" Neue Galerie New York. Acquisition made possible in part through the generosity of the heirs of the Estates of Ferdinand and Adele Bloch-Bauer
([Illustration Credit 8.0](#))

Gold and Geld

THE GUSTAV KLIMT EXHIBITION will fill the Neue Galerie for an entire eight months, until the end of June 2008. Its attention-riveting center is Klimt's 1907 portrait of the prominent Viennese society figure and art patron Adele Bloch-Bauer, executed in oils, silver, and gold—a radiant example of his so-called Golden Style, which was inspired by the artist's two visits, in 1903, to Ravenna, where he saw the Byzantine mosaics in the Church of San Vitale. He was especially taken, Renée Price tells us in her catalogue commentary on the painting, by the mosaic image of the Empress Theodora, "glittering before an abstract gold background." These were "mosaics of unprecedented splendor," he wrote to his friend Emilie Flöge. But Byzantine mosaics were not the only influences tugging this portrait toward decorative abstraction: Russian icons also embedded faces in a plane of gold; Egyptian art, which fascinated Klimt, is echoed in the hieroglyphic eyes dominating Adele's strapped dress; and Japanese woodcuts, Janis Staggs writes in her catalogue essay on Klimt's relation to Emilie Flöge, "typically schematize the human body hierarchically: the face and hands are depicted with painstaking verisimilitude, whereas other physical attributes—as well as clothing and elements of nature—are rendered more abstractly." Horizontal eyes and vertical half-moons in the sitter's garments both suggest vaginas, indicating another of the painter's interests and doing nothing to discourage persistent but unproven rumors of a romantic connection between the artist and his subject. The main titillation, however, to the throngs that crowd the Neue Galerie's marble stairs and exiguous spaces is perhaps less Klimt's sexiness than Ronald S. Lauder's extravagance; he paid \$135 million to add the portrait to his collection and his museum, once the work had, over a half-century after its expropriation by the Nazis, been restored by a panel of Austrian judges to the Bloch-Bauer heirs. So Adele Bloch-Bauer's portrait is by several reckonings a celebrity painting, bound to be the star attraction for years to come at the elegant little museum bestowed by the Lauder

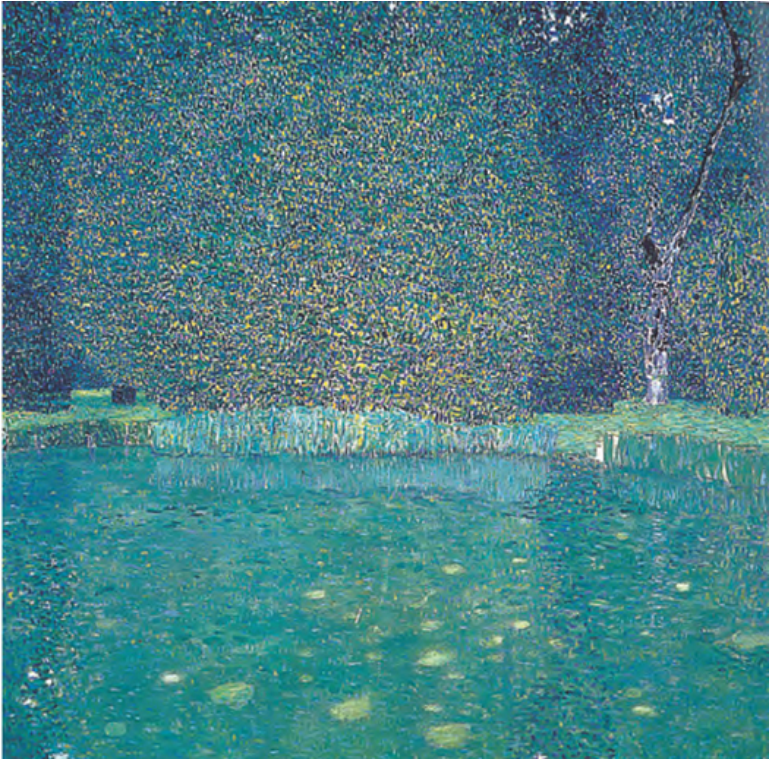
cosmetics fortune upon the corner of Fifth Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street.

Dazzling in the amount of gold and *Geld* lavished upon it, *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (another portrait, less dazzling, followed in 1912) repels critical judgment. Does its subject's lush, heavy-lipped, dark-browed, green-eyed face, beneath a black blob of hair and above a silver-encrusted collar, a pale stretch of upper chest, and a rather anxiously wrung pair of skinny pale hands, really mesh with the astonishing efflorescence of perspective-free patterns—eyes, spirals, squares, streaks, and splotches, ostensibly related to the wistful sitter's dress, robe, and armchair? Or does she look like a decal stuck onto a collage of tinselly wrapping paper? A witty and surprising patch of green in the lower left corner represents, it must be, a floor—otherwise the Vienna socialite, twenty-six at the time of this portrait, would seem to have been transported, bodiless, to a giddy Heaven of teeming ornament. Is such an abrupt juxtaposition of textures—Klimt's favored method in this decade, producing, most famously, *The Kiss* (1907–8)—a bold and necessary step in the direction of modernism, or an uneasy half-step, a cheaply bought glamour, a kind of higher kitsch? The viewer looks around the room, with its mute watchmen of Wiener Werkstätte clocks, at the other six Klimt paintings on display, for orientation.



KLIMT *The Dancer*, 1916–18 Oil on canvas, 71 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 35 $\frac{3}{8}$ " Private collection
([Illustration Credit 8.1](#))

The Dancer (1916–18), a much later, unsigned, and unfinished canvas that prior to the spectacular new acquisition was the museum's featured Klimt, also holds a clash of textures, but, more roughly painted, in stabbing brushstrokes that testify to the painter's struggles with portraits in his later years, seems to consist not of two distinct planes but of only one and a half. My gaze rested most comfortably, I found, on the near-monochrome *The Park of Schloss Kammer* (c. 1910), its pointillist mix of greens and blues flooding the large square canvas to the corners; the little, early, vertical *Pale Face* (1903), a study in black, cream, and mauve, the black insouciantly descending from bulky hat to flowing hair to dark coat without a break in its sinuous contour; and, earlier still, *The Tall Poplar Tree I* (1900), another dark shape reaching past the painting's upper edge, against a radiant sky where bits of surreally sharp azure stare through the clouds. All three paintings show the painter's wish to banish perspectival depth—to confess, as it were, the flatness of the canvas—yet also respond to the stimuli of natural appearance: green dabs of motion in the foreground pond of the park; the sharp nose and long chin and meditative smile of the female contemplative, a café-haunter à la Toulouse-Lautrec; and the fuzzy saplings and dotted flowers in the orchard beneath the white sky, seen with Impressionism's soft focus. These paintings have a settled peace, whereas the brazen, theatrical patterning of Klimt's Golden Style, not to mention the hectically crowded symbols of his once-scandalous murals, have about them the nerved-up anxiety of fashion, which is always being pushed from behind by the next spectacular thing.



KLIMT *The Park of Schloss Kammer*, c. 1910 Oil on canvas, 43¼ × 43¼" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 8.2](#))



KLIMT *The Tall Poplar Tree 1*, 1900 Oil on canvas, 31½ × 31½" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 8.3](#))

Fronting on Fifth Avenue, the former library holds a collection of photos and memorabilia indicating that Klimt—smartly bearded, increasingly high-browed—cut quite a figure in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. He was a lifelong Viennese, one of seven children of an impoverished metal engraver from Bohemia, and a considerable womanizer, in an era when womanizing still had a good name. He never married, living with his mother and sisters, though one model/mistress, Marie (Mizzi) Zimmermann, bore him two sons around the turn of the century. He concentrated on easel painting only after the breakup of the Künstler-Compagnie, formed in 1883 by him, his brother Ernst, and Franz Matsch, their fellow student at the Technical School for Drawing and Painting, to decorate theaters and public buildings in, his catalogue biography states, “the Historicist style, without stylistic differences, and with the allowance that one will take over

another's work, should they be unable to complete it." The breakup was hastened by Ernst's death in 1892 and by "the stylistic evolution of Gustav." His post-Historicist career was stormy, punctuated by academic resignations and critical vicissitudes. The critic Hermann Bahr wrote in 1899 of Klimt's just-completed *Schubert at the Piano* that it was "the finest painting ever done by an Austrian....I know of no modern that has struck me as so great and pure as this one," and four years later, in 1903, edited an anthology of hostile articles entitled *Gegen Klimt* ("Against Klimt"). Klimt relished the role of artist, posing, in photographs, like a priest, with Emilie Flöge or alone, in one of the loose caftans or robes called *Reformkleider*; a blue one worn by Klimt is on display, stitched with arcane symbols on the shoulders.



KLIMT *Pale Face*, 1903 Oil on canvas, 31½ × 15¾" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 8.4](#))

Farther along on the Eighty-sixth Street side, a dim chamber holds Klimt drawings from his student days on, almost all of them from the collection of the Galerie's co-founder, the dealer and collector Serge Sabarsky. They reveal Klimt's dark secret: he was a superb draftsman in the academic manner, a master of its most rigorous requirements. To become a modern, he had a great deal to unlearn. His two heads of a bearded man, in charcoal with white heightening, gleam with exactitude, from bald pate to gauzy hair-ends; his portrait, also in 1879, of a pre-adolescent girl is softer and more soulful. The two male nudes in pencil from the next year astound us with their photographic accuracy, especially the dramatically reclining pose, with its scrupulously detailed genitals and its startling burst of chin whiskers erupting on the horizon of the foreshortened chest. By the mid-1880s, collecting visages and costumes for the cooperative murals of the Künstler-Compagnie, Klimt loosened up, sketching and shading with a professional dash. In a profile of a fat man (1897–98), the slashing strokes of black chalk attained a studied fury. From the same years, the drawing ponderously titled *Floating Female Nude in Front of Dark Background* arrives at his mature eroticism. The nude is seen, in what will become a habitual point of view, from below, her pubic bush pushed forward in our gaze, her feet eliminated (hence the “floating”), and her belly, waist, breasts, and underarm arrayed in a series of waves that crest in her averted face, eyes closed as if she is ecstatic or drowned or about to be frontally possessed.



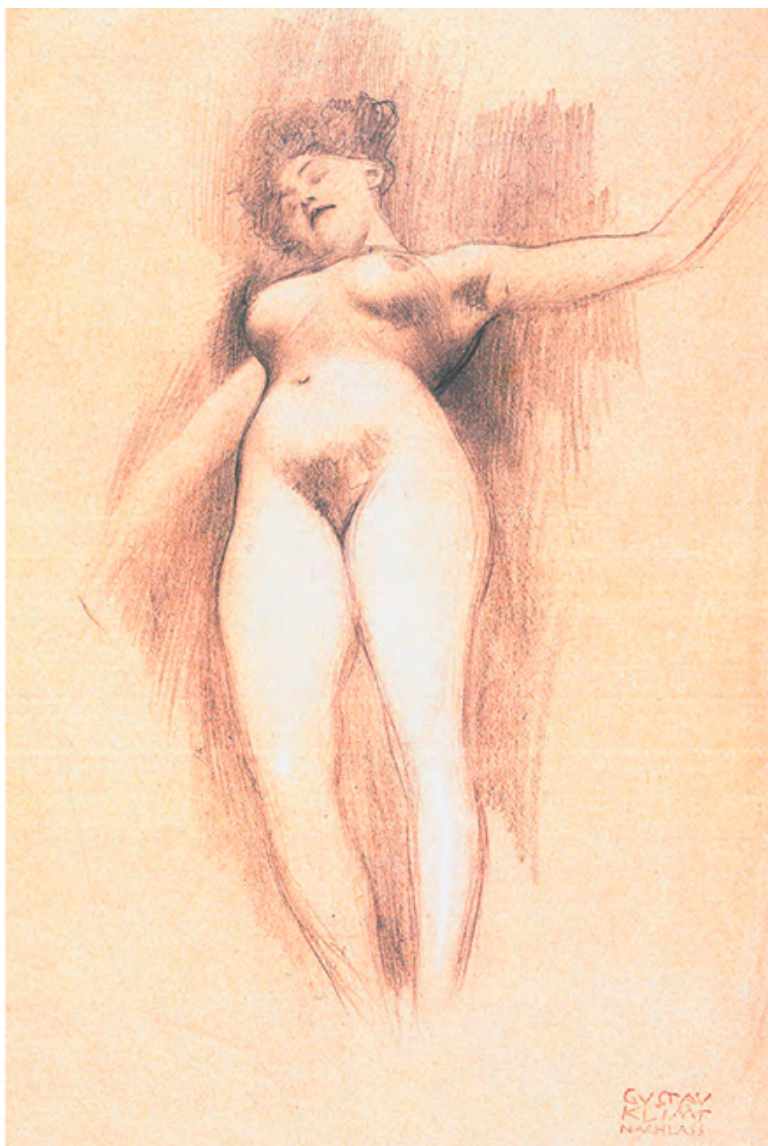
KLIMT *Portrait of a Bearded Man*, c. 1879 Charcoal with white heightening, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " Serge Sabarsky Collection ([Illustration Credit 8.5](#))



KLIMT *Portrait of a Girl, Head Slightly Turned Left*, 1879 Charcoal with white heightening, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ " Serge Sabarsky Collection ([Illustration Credit 8.6](#))

Upstairs, later drawings from Sabarsky's extensive collection are hung in narrow corridors that give the jostling art-viewers, while Viennese waltzes and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony play in the background, a heated sensation of the illicit. Visitors to Klimt's last studio, an "unadorned garden house" at Feldmühlgasse 11, which he occupied from 1912 until his death of a stroke early in 1918, reported an abundance of naked

models, casually disposed in a “voluntary hermitage” that “friends rarely dared enter.” A female visitor, Berta Zuckerkandl, an artistically well-connected journalist who won Klimt’s confidence, said of his models that “there were always several of them waiting in the anteroom, so that he had a continuous and various supply of models available for the theme ‘woman.’ ” An unnamed visitor left a more specific account of the artist at work:



KLIMT *Floating Female Nude in Front of Dark Background*, 1897–98 Pencil with white heightening, 17¾ × 12⅝" Serge Sabarsky Collection ([Illustration Credit 8.7](#))



KLIMT *Seated Female Semi-Nude Facing Front*, c. 1907 Pencil with red and blue pencil highlights, 22½ × 14⅝" Serge Sabarsky Collection ([Illustration Credit](#))

surrounded by mysterious, naked women who, while he stood silent before his easel, wandered up and down his workshop, sprawled, lazed about, and made the best of the day, always ready at a signal from the master to hold still obediently whenever he spotted a pose, a movement, that attracted his sense of beauty when captured hurriedly in a quick sketch.

To judge by the surviving evidence, there was a great deal of sprawling about, rear end foremost or thighs generously spread. Masturbation, in a supine position (*Reclining Nude Facing Right*, 1912–13) or prone (*Reclining Female Semi-Nude Facing Right*, 1914–15), is a frequent theme; some of the more vivid adepts (*Seated Woman in Armchair*, c. 1913; *Seated Woman with Spread Thighs*, 1916–17) are, but for their crotches, completely clothed, as if acting on a sudden inspiration. Marian Bisanz-Prakken, in her essay on the late allegorical works *The Virgin* and *The Bride*, delicately but confidently touches on the question of these models' compliant exhibitionism:

With his sure instinct for the nuances of feminine eroticism, Klimt registered the actions and reactions of women who gave themselves over to this intimate activity before his eyes uninhibitedly (Klimt's charismatic hold over his models was legendary).

Lesbianism and pregnancy were also depicted by this resolute explorer of "the theme 'woman.'" As Tobias G. Natter says in his catalogue essay on Klimt's illustrations of an unabridged German translation of Lucian of Samosata's *Dialogues of the Hetaerae* (1905):

Klimt's drawings made an abundant contribution to the iconography of the forbidden....Klimt depicted women in onanistic raptures, illustrated the erotic potentials of self-contemplation, and took on the voluptuous theme of lesbianism. In doing so, he managed both to touch on age-old prohibitions and to engage (primarily) male fantasies.

Many of the drawings, it should be said, are beautiful as well as shameless. They are bigger, with a calmer line, than those of Klimt's younger contemporary and fellow explorer Egon Schiele. As Natter points out,

Schiele, working at the borderlines between Jugendstil and Expressionism, had a very different, basically self-referential (even self-destructive)

approach to his depictions. Klimt, by contrast, was a draftsman in the purest sense.

However hastily scribbled his sketches are, his academically trained conscience does not permit him Schiele's anatomical distortions, or the undercurrent of desperate unhealth emphasized by Schiele's splotches of color. Klimt's *hetaerae* are healthy, though they doze a lot.

Together, the two men restored genitals to the non-pornographic nude, and sketched sex in something like its melancholy complexity. Vienna in the first decades of the twentieth century was the capital of sexual realism, as Freud, paper by paper, carefully placed the sex drive at the center of the human psyche. Klimt, with his harem of languid models and society portrait subjects (portrait commissions, almost always of women, were his financial mainstay), did his part, and his drawings of nudes broke ground; but drawings are not enough to generate revolution in art, and his ambition was nothing less. The first president of the Viennese Secession, he followed as well as initiated artistic currents. Among the foreign influences to which he exposed himself was that of the art newly imported from Africa. In 1914, his catalogue biography notes, "he visits the Brussels Musée du Congo, and is deeply impressed by the sculptures displayed." Maybe so, but it was Picasso's impulsive inclusion of African heads in the discordant, unfinished *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) that marks, in most art histories, the beginning of the modern. Picasso, with Cubism and his subsequent radical distortions of human form, dug below the skin of reality; Klimt stayed on the surface with his appliqués of abstract pattern, his gaudy faux fabrics.



KLIMT *Reclining Female Nude Facing Right*, 1914–15 Pencil, $14\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{8}$ " Serge Sabarsky Collection ([Illustration Credit 8.9](#))



KLIMT *Female Nude Turned Left*, 1914–15 Pencil, $14\frac{3}{8} \times 22\frac{7}{8}$ " Private collection ([Illustration Credit 8.10](#))

Klimt's awkward position on the threshold of modernism suggests that of James McNeill Whistler, whom Klimt admired and imitated. Both men heard modernism's call to "make it new," but didn't know quite how to answer. As Manu von Miller says in

her catalogue essay “Embracing Modernism: Gustav Klimt and Sonja Knips,”

Klimt shared with Whistler a penchant for elaborate and effective systems of decoration....They both had an abiding interest in Far Eastern arts, and were drawn toward creating a break from representational depiction and planar pictorial conventions....Klimt’s “white women portraits”—Serena Lederer (1899), Gertha Felsövényi (1902), and Hermine Gallia (1903–4)—recall Whistler’s depictions of girls dressed in white and surrounded by flowers, known as his *Symphonies in White* (painted between 1862 and 1873).

Both men, she might have said, were combative poseurs, who put into their flamboyant bachelor lives the artistic energy that, toward the end, leaked away in a litter of uncompleted canvases.



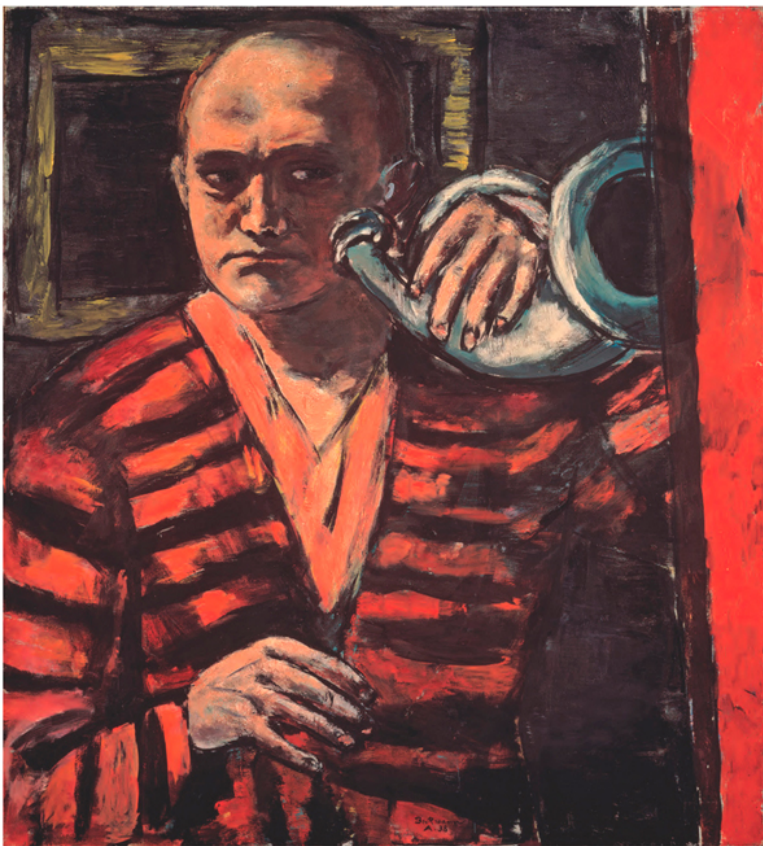
KLIMT “*The Hostile Powers*” (diptych) from *The Beethoven Frieze*, 1902 Casein colors on stucco with gold foil, chalk, graphite, mother-of-pearl discs, and semi-precious stones, each panel 248 × 87¼” Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna ([Illustration Credit 8.11](#))

As far as paintings at the Neue Galerie go, eight—*Hope II (Vision)* (1907–8), a pregnant woman in profile between two slabs of flecked gold, hangs on the third floor in a reconstruction of one of Klimt’s studios—are not enough to show the curve of a career. Most of his best pre-Golden Style paintings, such as the luminously tense and feathery portrait of Sonja Knips (1898), are still in Vienna; some, like *Schubert at the Piano* (1898–99), were destroyed or lost during the war. The Neue Galerie owns two large-scale portraits and two interesting studies of female heads, but none of the lush aquatic fantasies—*Moving Water* (1898); *Nixies (Silver Fish)* (c. 1899); *Goldfish* (1901–2); *Water Serpents I and II* (both 1904–7)—whereby Klimt illustrated his scandalous enthusiasm for Darwin’s theory of evolution. His controversial murals defy importation, but a large three-part reproduction of

his casein-on-stucco *Beethoven Frieze* (1902) more than satisfies our appetite for Art Nouveau symbolification. The main panel (“The Hostile Powers”) contains three nude gorgons (Sickness, Mania, and Death), three personified sins (Licentiousness, Intemperance, and Indecency), a cartoon gorilla representing the ancient Greek evil giant Typhon, a human male and female embracing within a transparent amniotic sack, an octopus, and semi-abstract forms that represent primitive organisms and/or evolving geometric order. All this, and allusions to Goethe, too.

The Neue Galerie was founded, on the strength of one man’s passion and fortune, to give a presence, along Manhattan’s Museum Row, to German and Austrian art, particularly that of the early twentieth century. The newly acquired Klimt, notorious for its purchase price, makes, with its attendant exhibition, the requisite stir, and impressively sustains the mission.

Gustav Klimt: The Ronald S. Lauder and Serge Sabarsky Collections, at Neue Galerie New York, October 18, 2007–June 30, 2008.



MAX BECKMANN *Self-Portrait with Horn*, 1938 Oil on canvas, $43\frac{5}{16} \times 39\frac{3}{4}$ "
Private collection ([Illustration Credit 9.0](#))

Bridges to the Invisible

COME, DESCEND WITH ME to lower Broadway and the Guggenheim Museum there (suggestive, in its converted old warehouse, of a discount outlet for the goods on display in the chic spiralling main emporium on upper Fifth Avenue) and discover, upon arising from the subway and perambulating half-gentrified streets thronged with jubilantly hairy youths and tall thin girls clad entirely in this season's remorseless black, and then upon threading through the bustling museum shop, with its plastic spread of modernist kitsch, past the vast flashing bank of computer-manipulated, laser-disc-fed television monitors designed by Nam June Paik and entitled *Megatron*—discover, I say (its doors as discreetly marked as its financial sponsorship by Lufthansa and Deutsche Bank), an exhibit of twenty-one late paintings, including seven of his famous triptychs, by Max Beckmann (1884–1950). What have we here, so incongruously nestled under a second-floor show of electronic manipulations and virtually empty rooms called *Mediascape*? We have painting, pure and simple—painting that in its clarion colors, packed human groupings, and unmistakable metaphysical intent recalls the grand European tradition. We are challenged, in this age of acute aesthetic impatience, wherein visual stimulations have the duration and subtlety of electric shock treatments, by works so nakedly, simply representations in pigment and yet so stubbornly withholding of easy pleasures and a clear message. Some sort of colorful struggle is going on, but in terms almost entirely selfish, with no appeal to a public, by a sensibility to whom the Self is a self-evidently potent entity.

Beckmann, like Thomas Mann a scion of the German merchant class, was born into an intellectual world where Hegelian categories still shaped vision. Also like Mann, he was considered, by his avant-garde peers, to be conservative. He posed for himself in a tuxedo, for instance, and he disliked paintings that looked abstract or flat. In the pre-World War I hurly-burly of artistic theorizing, he disavowed connection with the brief-lived German

Expressionist groups Die Brücke and the Blaue Reiter. He claimed to have no program, stating in 1914 that “all theory and all matters of principle in painting are hateful to me.” Nevertheless, he could issue pithy statements with lofty overtones. In 1938, a year after leaving Germany forever, he stated before an English audience:

What I want to show in my work is the idea that hides itself behind so-called reality. I am seeking the bridge that leads from the visible to the invisible....It may sound paradoxical, but it is, in fact, reality which forms the mystery of our existence....One of my problems is to find the self, which has only one form and is immortal....Art is creative for the sake of realization, not for amusement; for transfiguration, not for the sake of play. It is the quest of our self that drives us along the eternal and never-ending journey we must all make.

Nine years later, addressing his first art class in the United States, he again insisted on the role of the self in painting:

If you want to reproduce an object, two elements are required: first, the identification with the object must be perfect; and second, it should contain, in addition, something quite different. This second element is difficult to explain. Almost as difficult as to discover one's self. In fact, it is just this element of your own self that we are all in search of.

He painted more self-portraits than any significant artist since Rembrandt. (A forthcoming collection of his writings, including artistic statements, speeches, diary entries, letters, and a pair of turgid plays, bears the fitting title *Self-Portrait in Words*.)^{*} The SoHo show, *Max Beckmann in Exile*, contains a portrait of himself in white tie and tails (1937), another in an orange-and-black-striped clown's or prisoner's outfit, with a horn (1938), a third with his second wife, Quappi (1941), and still another as an acrobat squatting on his trapeze (1940). Additionally, a visage very like his own figures in costume paintings like *The King* (1933–37) and *Actors* (1941–42). All his symbol-fraught canvases, especially the triptychs, give an impression of transmuted autobiographical discourse. Generally, he makes of his own face a challenging, militant complex of dramatically contrasting planes; he edits out what we see in the photographs of him—a jowly, liquid-eyed softness, a watery burgherish humanity. In his art he appears as a fierce quester, a knight of the self-search. In the large 1937 image, done the year when Hitler's aesthetic

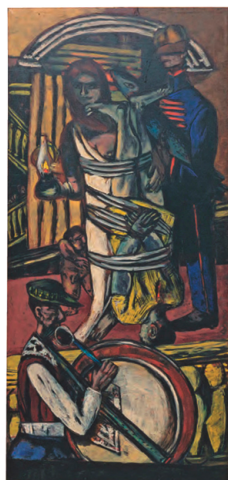
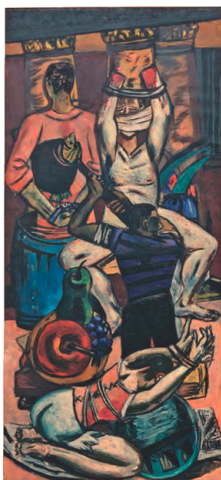
vandalism is about to drive him out of Germany, unease shows in the off-center pose, which leaks off the left edge of the canvas, and in the tipping, unreadable perspective of the stair on which he stands, and the striking hands, so heavy and large as to be useless; but the face is indomitable.



BECKMANN *The King*, 1933–37 Oil on canvas, 53 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{9}{16}$ " The St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri. Bequest of Morton D. May, 850.1983 ([Illustration Credit 9.1](#))

Beckmann took on heroic stature with the work he did in exile in Amsterdam from 1937 to 1947, followed by three years, before his death, in the United States. Long well known and admired in Germany, he was named a degenerate artist by the Nazis, and more than five hundred of his works were removed from state museums. In Amsterdam, where his wife's sister lived, the Beckmanns rented a small apartment in a narrow gabled house; the attic was a tobacco storeroom, with a skylight. Here, amid wartime privations that may have helped to concentrate his attention, he painted as much as ten hours a day, and carried forward the series of triptychs that had become his special mode of ambition and of connection with the masterworks of the past.

However, the best known of these, *Departure* (1932–33), which hangs in the Museum of Modern Art, was painted when his own departure and the horrors of the Nazi era lay in the realm of foreboding. For all the obscurities of its symbolism, the triptych offers a clear and memorable contrast between the side panels, which seem to show scenes of torture in a palace basement, and the central one, with its royal family embarking on a pellucid sea in an atmosphere of sunny calm. The king's crown rests squarely on the blue horizon line, and we do not need an interpreter to tell us that *Departure* is about freedom and domestic peace and their opposites. The centerpiece has an unforced mythic largeness; its saturation in blues reminds us of a sentence from Beckmann's 1938 description of color as "the strange and magnificent expression of the inscrutable spectrum of Eternity." His pallid, cartoonish earlier style, with its doll-like figures, has been overthrown by a brilliant brusqueness of attack.



BECKMANN *Departure* (triptych), 1932–33 Oil on canvas, left and right panels 84 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", central panel 84 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 45 $\frac{1}{4}$ " The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1942. Given anonymously (by exchange), 6.1942a,b,c ([Illustration Credit 9.2](#))

To use the rather Nietzschean term of some contemporary critics, Beckmann is a “strong” painter: his stained-glass colors and emphatic black outlines announce his presence on a museum wall from afar. Powerfully attracted, we draw closer and are put off, puzzled by the ambiguities and crudities of the representation. His painting is just that, and not drawing; Beckmann could not, or would not, draw: his figures are lumpy and misshapen, with comically ponderous feet, and hands that are all fingers. More than one of his women seems to have her head on backward, and he is brutally fond of impossibly parted legs. Nor is his painting, in its exile phase, illustration, as were his Biblical panoramas of 1917 or his immense study of *Titanic* survivors (1912). Even in a simple canvas like *Falling Man* (1950) it is hard to know what is happening, amid this billowing smoke and these little winged nudes standing in cockleshells; the very sensation of falling is negated by the foot that just reaches over the top edge of the canvas, so that the man seems to be more dangling than falling.

In the triptychs, the figures are crowded like frat brothers in a telephone booth or cardboard cutouts in a display window, with small regard paid to the laws of perspective. Beckmann almost

deified space, claiming:

The essential meaning of space or volume is identical with individuality, or that which humanity calls God. For in the beginning there was space, that frightening and unthinkable invention of the Force of the Universe.



BECKMANN *Falling Man*, 1950 Oil on canvas, 55¹³/₁₆ × 35" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mrs. Max Beckmann, 1975.96.3 ([Illustration Credit 9.3](#))

Yet he gives us, with few exceptions, a shallow space crammed to the point of claustrophobia with bleakly staring, unrelated figures. *Blind Man's Bluff* (1944–45) is an especially disquieting example of this tendency; possibly intended to compare barbarism, indicated by a drummer, and civilization, embodied in a harpist, side by side, the central painting and its side pieces are so overloaded as to suggest only a jammed apartment party in which no one can hear anyone else.

Reinhard Spieler, in his catalogue essay on the triptychs (translated from the German by Isabelle Moffat), makes as much sense of them as they are likely to yield. Their myriad population, in Spieler's careful accounting, holds five recurring figures—the king, the warrior, the bellboy, the young man, and the woman. As to their settings, "Four main areas in which Beckmann staged his dramas can be identified: the theater or stage (including the circus); the temple (or place of ritual); the bar, pub, or dance club; and the artist's studio." In the first six triptychs, Spieler detects allusions to contemporary events in Nazi Germany; for him, the nine completed triptychs form a kind of running exploration, like Auden's poems or Tolstoy's later fiction, of how men should live. The last completed triptych, *The Argonauts* (1949–50), according to Spieler "is Beckmann's painted hymn to the mission of the arts to assist humanity in its search for knowledge." This may be true; *The Argonauts* does seem the simplest triptych, the one most submissive to a reductive reading. But why is the painter in the left-hand panel taking as his model a steatopygous bare-breasted Amazon clutching a phallic sword, and why is the sky of the central panel so crowded with barbaric omens? Discordant, random elements frustrate every attempt at strict allegorical interpretation. The making of a painting clearly meant more to Beckmann than the spelling out of a helpful humanitarian message. He does not coolly issue a generalized meaning but strives to body forth what has meaning for him, however obscure. In a "creative credo" issued in 1918, he said:

I believe that essentially I love painting so much because it forces me to be objective. There is nothing I hate more than sentimentality. The stronger

my determination grows to grasp the unutterable things of this world ... the tighter I keep my mouth shut and the harder I try to capture the terrible, thrilling monster of life's vitality and to confine it, to beat it down and to strangle it with crystal-clear, razor-sharp lines and planes.



BECKMANN *The Argonauts* (triptych), 1949–50 Oil on canvas, left and right panels 74 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 33", center panel 79 $\frac{15}{16}$ × 48" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mrs. Max Beckmann, 1975.96.1a,b,c ([Illustration Credit 9.4](#))

When told by his dealer, Curt Valentin, that some clients wanted an explanation of *Departure*, Beckmann wrote him:

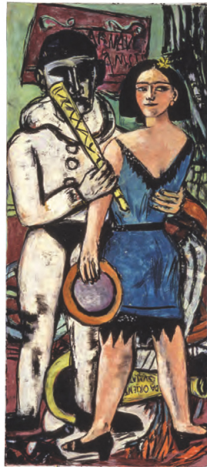
Take the picture away or send it back to me, dear Valentin. If people cannot understand it of their own accord, of their own inner "creative sympathy," there is no sense in showing it....The picture speaks to me of truths impossible for me to put in words and of which I did not ever know before. I can only speak to people who consciously or unconsciously, already carry within them a similar metaphysical code.

Approached with my own code, the triptychs present a patchwork of opulent color in which the pallor of flesh flickers tantalizingly. Beckmann skillfully strikes the bright note of bareness in the king's back in *Departure*, the bare limbs and torso in *Acrobats* (1939), the embonpoint in *Actors*, the enticing legs and shoulders in *Carnival* (1942–43) and *Blind Man's Bluff*. Not every modern painter makes bare skin electric; Degas and Modigliani can do it, but not Cézanne and Matisse. The Old Masters, with their goddesses and Oriental queens, do it all the

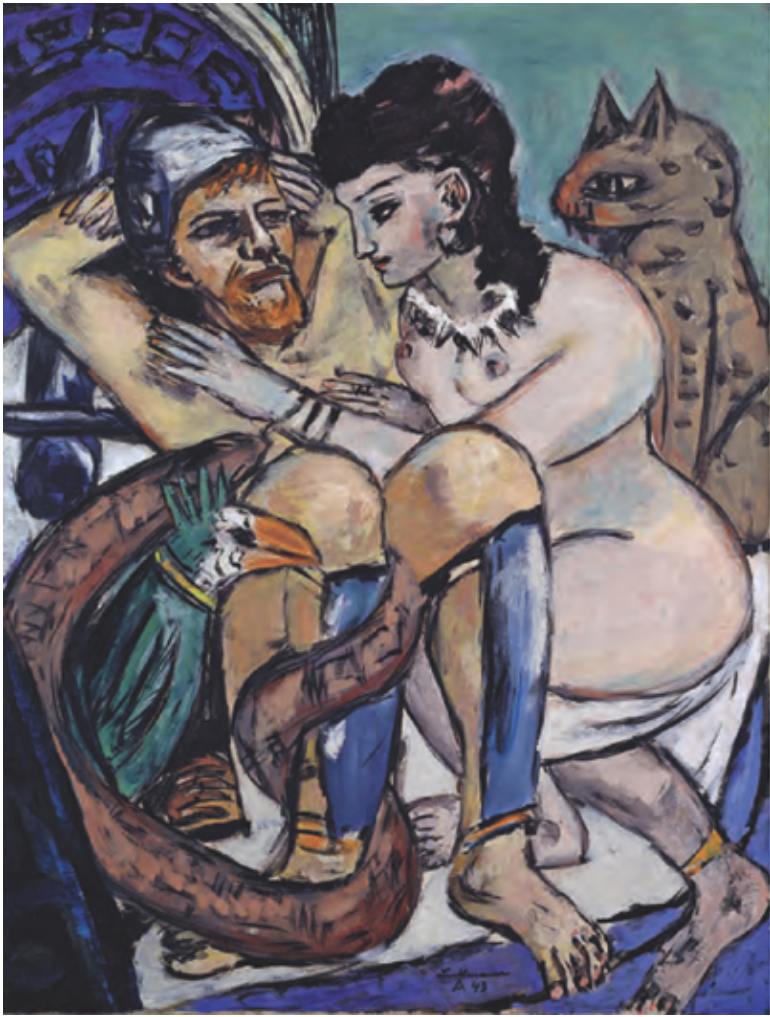
time. It is Beckmann's love of flesh that keeps his painting from being the "two-dimensional spatial experience" that amounts, he said in 1928, to mere "applied art and ornament." In the painting *Afternoon* (1946), the woman's bared thighs flash seductively, piteously, as her Moorish assailant seizes her wrist. Not in the SoHo show are such reposing nude couples as *Odysseus and Calypso* (1943), *Brother and Sister* (first titled *Siegmund and Sieglinde*, 1933), and *City of Brass* (1944), which have a near-pornographic effect, less through their details than through their overall blaze of flesh. Beckmann twisted in the grip of sex; in 1946, he wrote in his diary, "Cold rage rules my soul. Should one never become free from this endless disgusting vegetative corporeality....Boundless contempt for the lewd charms with which we are coaxed again and again to take life's bit." Even his boyhood was invaded by unchastity: the triptych *Beginning* (1946–49) has in the foreground of its central panel a trollop in a blouse and stockings, blowing bubbles, while a boy rides a white rocking horse and brandishes a sword. The right-hand panel shows, in Beckmann's blocky, Légeresque final style, a classroom, and nearest to the viewer one male pupil is surreptitiously passing another an image of a naked woman.



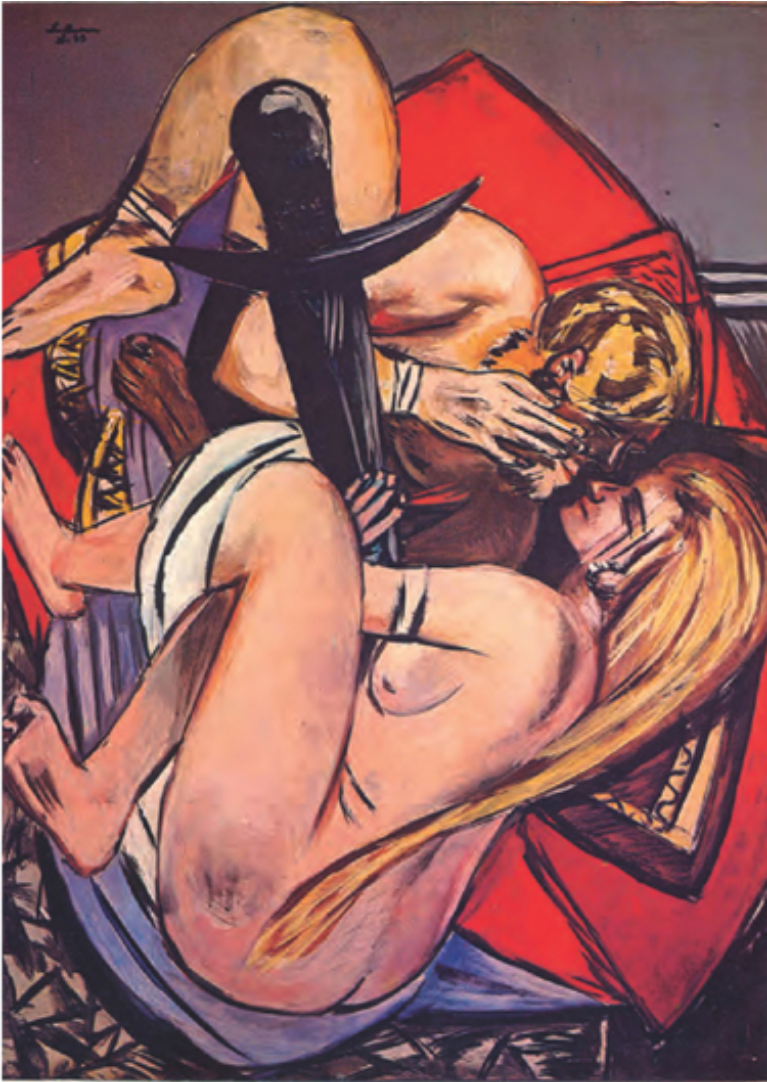
BECKMANN *Blind Man's Bluff* (triptych), 1944–45 Oil on canvas, left and right panels 75₃/₁₆ × 43₅/₁₆", center panel 80₁₁/₁₆ × 90₉/₁₆" The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Winston, 55.27a,b,c
([Illustration Credit 9.5](#))



BECKMANN *Carnival* (triptych), 1942–43 Oil on canvas, left and right panels 74 $\frac{13}{16}$ × 41 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", center panel 74 $\frac{13}{16}$ × 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ " The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City. Mark Ranney Memorial Fund, 1946.1 ([Illustration Credit 9.6](#))



BECKMANN *Odysseus and Calypso*, 1943 Oil on canvas, 59 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 45 $\frac{1}{2}$ " Hamburger Kunsthalle ([Illustration Credit 9.7](#))



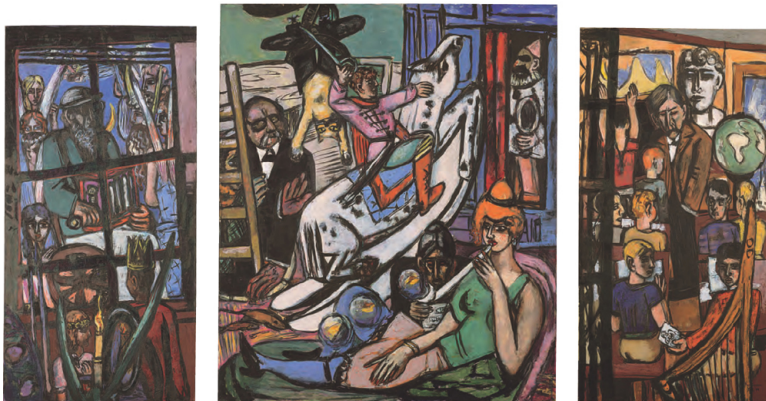
BECKMANN *Brother and Sister*, 1933 Oil on canvas, 53½ × 39½" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 9.8](#))

In the left-hand panel, the boy hero is looking into a Christmas window while wearing a crown. I take this to signify that in our individual self-hood we are all kings (or queens); life is therefore a palace, a royal pageant, a circus, a performance in which people do stunts, play parts, wear masks. Through all this crowded and colorful show a sordid secret flickers: the fish in

Beckmann is the symbol less of Christianity than of our slippery, odorous, expressionless genitals. *Journey on the Fish* (1934) is also titled *Man and Woman*, and shows them bound to two huge fish. In another early canvas in this exhibit, *The Little Fish* (1933), a young man shows his fish to two women; one lifts a finger in admonition but the other, who meekly gazes, is painted in her throat and cheeks with a beautiful rosy tenderness. Whatever else they are about, triptychs like *Carnival* and *Blind Man's Bluff* are about gender relations—sometimes supportive, sometimes fraught. In the left panel of *Departure*, a man and a woman are bound together, foot to face; in *Air Balloon with Windmill* (1947), a couple is caged together; in *The Rescue* (1948), the Tahitian couple are on the verge of copulation; even in the depths of *Bird's Hell* (1938), his most direct and furious presumed allusion to Nazism, a woman with four breasts dominates, arising blue from her Boschian egg.



BECKMANN *The Little Fish*, 1933 Oil on canvas, 53 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 45 $\frac{1}{2}$ " Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris ([Illustration Credit 9.9](#))



BECKMANN *Beginning* (triptych), 1946–49 Oil on canvas, left and right panels 65 × 33¼", center panel 69 × 59" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot, 67.187.53a,b,c ([Illustration Credit 9.10](#))

The triptych evolved for use in churches, and Beckmann was in his fashion a religious man, who spoke of God in his artistic credos and read not only German philosophy but Gnostic and Buddhist texts, the Vedanta and the Kabbala. When he writes of strangling and beating down the “thrilling monster of life’s vitality,” and of becoming free of “this endless disgusting vegetative corporeality,” his language prepares us for the stabbing, garish quality of his painting and the irreducible ambiguity of his meanings. A triptych not on display in the Guggenheim Museum SoHo is *Temptation* (1936–37); Beckmann might be described as one of those dialectical spirits for whom the world looms as a simultaneously alluring and repellent temptation.

Max Beckmann in Exile, at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, October 9, 1996–January 5, 1997.

**Self-Portrait in Words: Collected Writings and Statements, 1903–1950*, by Max Beckmann, edited and annotated by Barbara Copeland Buenger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Miró at MoMA

THE JOAN MIRÓ show, an ambitious, non-travelling assemblage of three hundred works, including more than a hundred sixty paintings, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, holds many surprises. MoMA's Picasso and Matisse shows confirmed, in the thundering colors of a massive retrospective, what we already knew; the Miró, which comes on the centenary of his birth, throws light into some unexpected corners and nooks in the divigatious progress of an artist who appears to have been thinking all the time. Picasso—that fellow Spaniard whose voracious shadow always threatened to swallow the diminutive, younger Miró—and Matisse were forces of nature, harvesters of sunlight. Miró had to supply his own force, out of his busy, buzzing head and his earthy Catalan roots. Like Henry Moore, he became in the end a modern-art celebrity; their signature biomorph forms served as company logos on their long-lived personal industries. Their rather reclusive, meditative geniuses achieved a global distribution and publicity that it is easy to resent. In fact Miró struggled gallantly against becoming formulaic, while remaining loyal to the not very ample stock of private imagery—eyes, vaginas, male genitalia, birds, stars, moons, mustaches, the Catalan peasant hats called *barretinas*—that supplied his art. Rather early, he ceased to feed on nature, in the sense of perceived externality, while holding fast, in his titles and increasingly abstract brushwork, to echoes of the organic.

The first surprise that greets us at MoMA is how good Miró was from the start, how stern and solid. The still lifes and the portraits done in his twenties, oils from a dark palette, have a knit intensity which it was the labor of his life to lighten and to explode. In "*Nord-Sud*" (1917), he is already at work creating a scattered effect, a slightly spinning disassociation of elements, including a yellow volume, thick as a cigar box, lettered "goethe." His sombre native bent resisted airiness. The element of collage in *La Publicidad and Flower Vase* (1917) floats like a pale scrap on the oily dark tangle of the patterned tabletop. The Cézannesque

green and orange planes of *Montroig, Sant Ramon* (1916) are incongruously solid, like folded clay, and are topped by a cube without a touch of Cubist fragmentation. In *Prades, the Village* (1917), as if despairing of ever getting the reckless Fauvist dash, Miró throws abstract colorful stripes into the foreground of a drab, academically drawn village and church.

The Cubists and the Fauves wished to disassemble the world visually; Miró's itch is to take it apart phenomenologically, as a set of signifiers. What is significant to him—his own face, naked women, the semitropical landscape of Montroig, near Barcelona—he cannot quite abandon to the Cubist chopping-machine. The two large early nudes of the exhibit, a standing nude from 1918 and a seated nude from the following year, are slashed but still intact, still fleshy. The first, a mauve sex-machine in her boudoir of luridly patterned hangings and carpet, is rather intimidating. By the time of the second, Miró is painting in thinly applied, subdued brown tones, and his nude is, with her fat brown pigtail, circular navel, and mirror like a Ping-Pong paddle, rather seductive. Between the self-portrait of 1917 and that of 1919, the subject appears to have aged fifteen years, and a large stylistic distance has been traversed, to the quietly edgy, carefully combed, spottily concentrated manner from which the artist will take his flying leap into Surrealism.



MIRÓ “Nord-Sud,” 1917 Oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 27 $\frac{5}{8}$ ” Private collection
([Illustration Credit 10.1](#))



MIRÓ *Prades, the Village*, 1917 Oil on canvas, 25½ × 28½" Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 69.1894 ([Illustration Credit 10.2](#))

His rural landscapes, with their feathery distinct leaves and furrowed fields as tidy as tiling, impinged on literary history when *The Farm* (1921–22) was purchased in 1926 by Ernest Hemingway. The writer told A. E. Hotchner, as recorded in Hotchner's *Papa Hemingway*, that

Miró and I were good friends; we were working hard but neither of us was selling anything. My stories would all come back with rejection slips and Miró's unsold canvases were piled up all over his studio. There was one that I had fallen in love with—a painting of his farm down south—it haunted me and even though I was broke I wanted to own it.

According to Carlos Baker's biography, Hemingway borrowed five thousand francs to pay for it, presented it to his wife, Hadley, for her thirty-fourth birthday, and hung it over their bed. He and the short, dapper, dignified Miró were friends and, even more incongruously, occasional boxing partners. Miró had come relatively late to Paris, at the age of twenty-six, explaining, "You

have to be an international Catalan; a homespun Catalan is not, and never will be, worth anything in the world.” He subsequently spent half of his years in Paris, returning for the other half to Barcelona and Montroig.

One tries to look at *The Farm* with Hemingway’s eyes, seeking what made him fall in love. Under a cold blue sky and small gray moon, a tan landscape and two white buildings hold a meticulous inventory of tools, furniture, and farm animals; like Hemingway’s early prose, the painting is possessed by an ecstasy of simple naming, a seemingly innocent directness that is yet challenging and ominous. He and Miró, their reminiscences reveal, were both often hungry in Paris, and hungry people see with a terrible clarity. Miró, perhaps jokingly, later claimed that hallucinations of near-starvation lay behind his surreal imagery.



MIRÓ *Self-Portrait*, 1917 Oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ " Musée Picasso, Paris
([Illustration Credit 10.3](#))

The museum has hung this celebrated *Farm*—which passed from Mary Hemingway to the National Gallery in Washington—in a corner along with *The Hunter* (1923–24), the canvas that achieved the mature Miró manner, in which representational figures are reduced to floating ideograms and the shadow of the third dimension is dismissed from what Marcel Duchamp called a “two-dimensional cosmogony.” The proximity of *The Farm* and *The Hunter* created a traffic jam of bumping, staring viewers, robotized by their educational headsets, and waiting to escape this gridlock of art-avid bodies gave one time to wonder whether Miró, when he turned his own corner into something “beyond

B. and *Head of Catalan Peasant, I* (both 1924), blue in *Head of Catalan Peasant, III* and *Personage* (both 1925)—are doodled upon with scarcely another dash of color. The process becomes even more audacious with *Photo* (1925), a largely bare canvas dabbled with a small puddle of blue captioned “*ceci est la couleur de mes rêves*,” and then in *Painting* (1925), a yard-wide canvas solidly scrubbed blue except for a minuscule sphere in the upper left corner, as lonely as a star in the cosmos. In *Head of Catalan Peasant, III*, the scrubbing has some cloudlike contour and the stars are several in number, and in *Personage* the scrubbing is very thin and permits the viewer—a rare privilege—to see the anatomy of the stretcher boards behind the canvas. This advanced degree of self-referentiality, of painter-consciousness, would not be seen again until post-war America, and is abandoned in Miró’s work to come, whose amoebic shapes and wandering lines take on a kind of superterrestrial substance. A leftover from Dada, the monochrome canvas serves not so much to dramatize the painter’s action, or to engulf the viewer’s field of vision, as to call into question, in metaphysical fashion, the ground upon which we, viewer and painter, stand. What is a painting? Since Impressionism, the answer must be “some square inches of paint.” One of the most effective of these paint-foremost paintings is *The Birth of the World* (1925), an eight-foot-high canvas down which splatterings of thin gray paint have been permitted to run, in effective metaphor for the primeval chaos upon which a few basic shapes, triangle and circle, have been imposed.

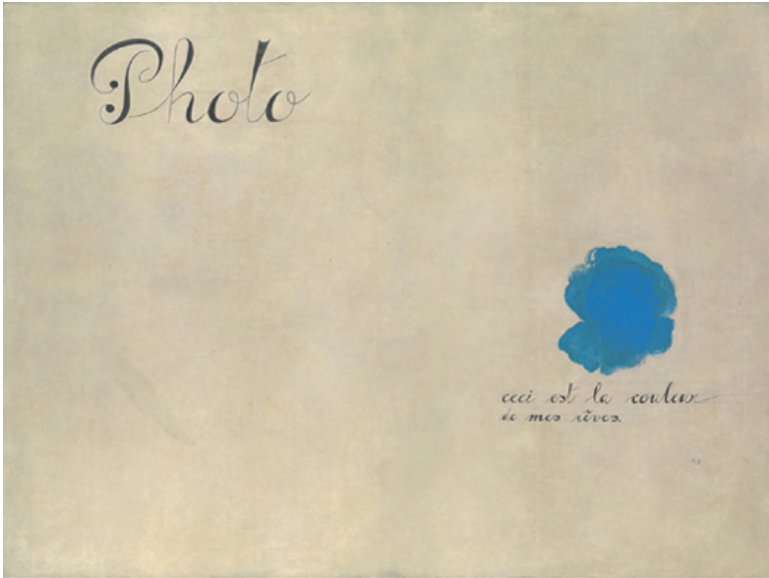


MIRÓ “48” (detail), 1927 Oil and water-soluble paint on glue-sized canvas, 57½ × 45” Private collection ([Illustration Credit 10.5](#))



KURT VONNEGUT Drawing ("Here is my picture of an asshole") from the preface to *Breakfast of Champions*, 1973 Felt-tip marker on bond paper (Illustration Credit 10.6)

But it does not do, as we move through the proliferating changes that Miró over the decades rang upon his little universe, to look for referents too specific. An asterisklike form may be one man's star and another man's stylized anus. Many of the paintings, colorful and relentlessly inventive as they are, pass through the eyes without much sticking fast. MoMA has collected Miró early and well, and the familiarity of their acquisitions arrests our somewhat bewildered progress—*Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird* (1926), with its amazing one-footed white Cyclops throwing without arms, beside a black sea under a green sky; *Dutch Interior (I)* (1928), accompanied in this exhibit by a set of photographs tracing the far-fetched permutations whereby H. M. Sorgh's cozy genre painting *The Lutanist* (1661) is transformed into a tangle of blobs in which only a lute and a dog with a pipe in its mouth can be easily identified; "*Hirondelle—Amour*" (1933–34), its swerving lines and quilt of color perhaps analogous to a swallow's flight or love's path; and *Still Life with Old Shoe* (1937), a throwback to the old meticulous still lifes, but in negative, in eerie neon colors. Miró's world is darkening. The blue cosmic vacancies and arching trajectories are closing down into darkness and, in the humanoid figures, a Picassoesque sense of torture. In the late 1930s, black becomes a background color, upon which is scrawled in white "*Une Étoile caresse le sein d'une négresse*" (1938), or a scattering of suns and moons and phosphorescent fish does for a *Self-Portrait II* (1938). *Woman Haunted by the Passage of the Bird-Dragonfly, Omen of Bad News* (1938), though designed to decorate a nursery, is full of terror, unenigmatically. Much of Miró's work of the 1930s seems an ugly cartooning, garish and mock-primitive.



MIRÓ *Photo*—"Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves," 1925 Oil on canvas, 38 × 51"
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Pierre and Maria-Gaetana Matisse
 Collection, 2002.456.5 ([Illustration Credit 10.7](#))



MIRÓ *Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird*, 1926 Oil on canvas, 29 × 36¼" The

Museum of Modern Art, New York, 271.1937 ([Illustration Credit 10.8](#))



MIRÓ *Self-Portrait II*, 1938 Oil on burlap, 51 × 77" Detroit Institute of Arts. Gift of W. Hawkins Ferry, 66.66 ([Illustration Credit 10.9](#))



MIRÓ "Une Étoile caresse le sein d'une négresse," 1938 Oil on canvas, 51 × 77" Tate Gallery, London ([Illustration Credit 10.10](#))

But an aesthetic triumph, and a victory over the horror descending on Europe, came in 1940, when Miró initiated a series

of twenty-three gouaches, on a uniform size of paper, that he completed twenty months later, having fled with his family from Normandy, which was being bombed by the Germans, to neutral Spain. It is the feat of this exhibition to have assembled in one room all twenty-three gouaches of the so-called *Constellation* series; together they form sublime chamber music, as the murky if antic figures give way to a jubilant dance of more and more constellated stars, spheres, and hourglasses. The visual gaiety of the room is dizzying; the globules of black and red, green, yellow, and blue chirp and chime and twitter. We are reminded, not for the first time in this show, that Miró's father was a watchmaker. By miniaturizing his motifs, and winding the space around them tighter, Miró rescues them from flabbiness; many of his pre-war paintings figure forth a stretched limpness like Dalí without perspective, or Tanguy without modelling. Most of the *Constellation* series was displayed in New York, at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, early in 1945, and, according to the current exhibit's brochure, "their flickering, all-over quality is frequently said to have influenced the young generation of American painters known as the Abstract Expressionists."



MIRÓ *Acrobatic Dancers* (*Constellation* series), 1940 Gouache and oil wash on paper, 18 × 15" Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut.
The Philip L. Goodwin Collection ([Illustration Credit 10.10](#))

In 1945, Miró was fifty-two, with over three decades of creativity left. He had become one of the great names of modernism. His riddling, doodlelike imagery appeared as murals, on tapestries, in fabrics and ceramics. Bulbous horned sculptures, bronze and stone, large and small, added a new, Mayan note to his range. In his prosperity, he was able to afford a large studio, in Palma de Mallorca, and painted there, in riposte to the Abstract Expressionist movement he had partly inspired, huge single-color canvases, whose decoration, though minimal, seems

to betray some uncertainty; the New York aesthetic rigorously expunged even a microbe of depiction. Abstract Expressionism, with its walls of paint, defied verbal formulation, whereas in Miró there is always a hint of a concept, a lurking poem. More wholehearted, in these last rooms, are the stabbing gestural paintings that, like an old shaman crying out to his fading gods, fling across the canvas in a kind of agony. Only in old age did Miró dare draw directly with the brush: even the works most seemingly submissive to psychic automatism had a methodical background of preliminary sketch and canvas preparation. Miró's last works are giant cave paintings, in a cosmos turned cave. The final one of the show appears to have a devil in it, and a blood-tipped knife.



MIRÓ *Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman* (Constellation series), 1941
Gouache and ink on paper, 18 × 15" The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Mrs.
Gilbert W. Chapman, 1953.388 ([Illustration Credit 10.12](#))

What was Miró thinking of, all these years? A literal deciphering of each of his runes, even if that were possible, says little about their visual effect, their meaning for a viewer. His paintings, unlike, say, those of Pollock or Picasso, are not self-explanatory; what you see is not quite what you get. Magic rites are being performed, but are they working? Surrealism was at heart a literary movement, based on the writings of Freud and elaborated into theory by the poet André Breton. Miró in his inscribed canvases and elaborate titles—*Woman at the Border of a Lake Irradiated by the Passage of a Swan*; *On the 13th, the Ladder Brushed the Firmament*; *The Red Sun Gnaws at the Spider*—displays a literary bent; his frequent theoretical pronouncements and his highly systematic way of organizing his work imply a system behind his work, a web of code. Critics like Carolyn Lanchner, who provides the admirably detailed introduction to this show's catalogue, are very welcome to puzzle away at the code, but in the meantime the lay viewer must wrestle with a sensation of exclusion as he glides from one opaquely symbol-laden canvas to the next. The ideogrammatic paintings of Paul Klee yield their meaning—their "import," one might better say—to a general awareness of the human condition; Miró by contrast has a perverse arcanum, bred perhaps of his Catalonian apartness from the run of European culture. He occupies an unstable place between figuration and abstraction; in 1923 he announced, "I have managed to break absolutely free of nature, and the landscapes have nothing to do with outer reality." On the other hand, he rejected an invitation to join a group of professedly abstract artists: "And they ask me into their deserted house, as if the marks I put on a canvas did not correspond to a concrete representation of my mind, did not possess a profound reality, were not a part of the real itself." The reality is personal, and—Walt Whitman, whom Miró admired, to the contrary—the personal is not self-evidently the site where "the eruption of the infinite in the finite takes place." Miró had the grand modernist impulse to formulate a new religion, but the privacy of his materials left the iconography thin.



MIRÓ *The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers* (Constellation series), 1941 Gouache, oil wash, and charcoal on paper, 18 × 15" The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, 7.1945 ([Illustration Credit 10.13](#))

Joan Miró, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 17, 1993–January 11, 1994.



ALEXANDRE HOGUE *Erosion No. 2— Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1936 Oil on canvas, 40¼ × 56¼" The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Museum purchase, 1946.4 ([Illustration Credit 11.0](#))

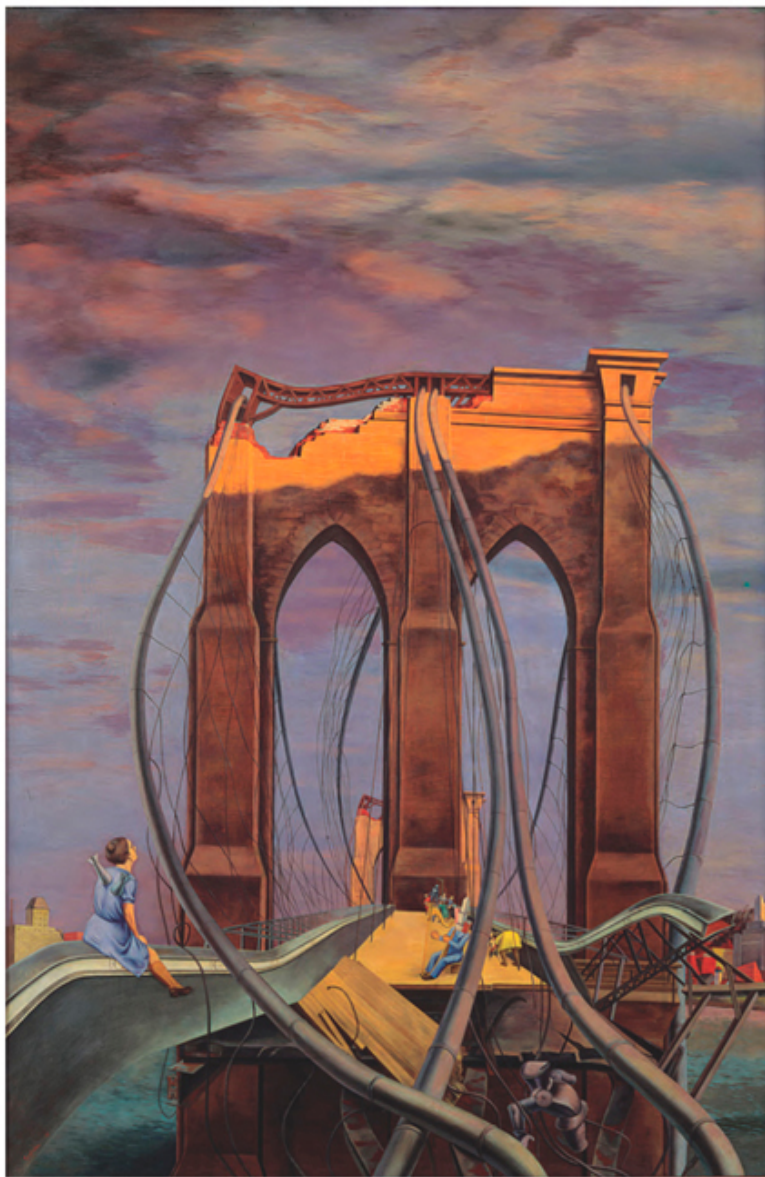
The Art of Our Disorder

SURREALISM USA, an exhibit of more than a hundred wildly varied works at the National Academy Museum, New York, lacks scale yet offers, to American viewers, considerable delectation and food for thought. Surrealism, goaded into national notice by frequent flamboyant invasions by Dalí and his pushy wife, the former Gala Éluard, had a vogue in the Thirties, but in pragmatic American fashion was harnessed to social protest. Walter Quirt and James Guy dramatized oppressed workers, O. Louis Guglielmi imagined a Brooklyn Bridge bombed by enemies of democracy, Peter Blume (in *The Eternal City*, a mid-Thirties panorama that used to have a prime spot among the Modern's moderns) deplored Mussolini, and Alexandre Hogue, in the exhibit's most startling image, depicted a giant nude formed of white clay exposed by topsoil erosion.

Many of these Americans do excellent imitations of Dalí's open spaces, slick surfaces, and conjunctions—to quote the Comte de Lautréamont's premonitory phrase—"of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table." Several artists—Joseph Cornell, Ivan Albright—are native eccentrics who fit the bill well enough to be included here. American art in general, whose primal memory is of the encounter with a hostile wilderness, takes to surreal exaggerations and metaphors; but its Puritan work ethic has little use for the playful self-indulgence behind Parisian Surrealism, a use of deliberate *dérèglement* as a path to fresh enlightenment. Such reckless introspection was a sport for university students and idle bohemians.

The exhibit includes not only a few untypically mystical and lovely abstractions by Arshile Gorky but a host of early works by names—Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston—that acquired fame as Abstract Expressionists. The sculptors Isamu Noguchi and David Smith, awkward and ironical here, went on to a triumphal monumentality. Though its paintings on the wall had a fussy, troubling cerebral slant—a willful ugliness, even—compared with an Impressionist or

abstract canvas, Surrealism was the cradle of the post-war American art boom. Nor did Surrealism ever, in the subsequent half-century, quite go away. Indeed, as I stared, from within the taxi to the airport, at the folk murals on the brick walls of East Harlem—NUESTRO BARRIO, one boasted, and another, yoking a God-like figure with an American flag, WE NEVER LOST POWER—and noted the conventionalized bulbous and floating letter forms of graffiti, it seemed possible that Surrealism is the natural, instinctive pictorial mode, and both abstraction and realism are academic refinements.



O. LOUIS GUGLIELMI *Mental Geography*, 1938 Oil on Masonite, 35¾ × 24" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 11.1](#))



PETER BLUME *The Eternal City*, 1934–37 Oil on board, 34 × 48" The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 574.1942

Surrealism USA, at the National Academy Museum, New York, February 17–May 8, 2005.



RENÉ MAGRITTE *Attempting the Impossible*, 1928 Oil on canvas, 45¼ × 31½"
Galerie Isy Brachot, Brussels–Paris ([Illustration Credit 12.0](#))

Magritte the Great

ONE DOES NOT EXPECT that the Magritte exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art will be a humanistic revelation of considerable grandeur, but it is. What the revelation exactly reveals defies words, much as his paintings defied words. “This is not a pipe” (“*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*”), the most notorious of his pictorial inventions declared, beneath the ironically distinct image of a pipe. Magritte’s unrelenting philosophical attempt was to dislocate our assumptions about reality—to remove the viewer from the realm of easy, readily verbalized concepts into a realm of ideas that, he said, were “capable of becoming visible *only* through painting.” The elaborate and literary titles his paintings bear were concocted not by him but by his Surrealist friends, acting as a playful committee in weekly meetings at Magritte’s apartment. He explained in a 1938 lecture: “The titles are chosen in such a way as to prevent my pictures from being situated in the reassuring region to which people’s minds would automatically assign them in order to underestimate their significance. The titles must be an extra protection which will discourage any attempt to reduce pure poetry to a trivial game.”

His early paintings, once his experimentations with the styles of Cubism, Futurism, Purism, and Art Deco are past, confront us with a series of denials. Color is denied by a grisaille style in which browns and grays predominate. A muddy, underlit quality makes us feel the indoor gloom of a Belgian winter, and a stodgy adherence to the “local color” of nineteenth-century academicism shuts out all the spattery brilliance the Impressionists had unleashed. Painterly texture is denied by a greasy, rather edgeless handling of the pigments. “I always try,” he said, “to make sure that the actual painting isn’t noticed, that it is as little visible as possible.” He helped support himself during the Twenties and Thirties by doing commercial illustration, and his paintings lose little in reproduction—indeed, some gain by it. For instance, *Time Transfixed* (1938), with its smoking locomotive shooting like a stovepipe from the back wall of a fireplace, seems duller in the

large original than when reduced, in the catalogue and exhibit flyer, to an image that can be grasped at a glance.



MAGRITTE *The Difficult Crossing*, 1926 Gouache on paper, 31¼ × 25¼" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 12.1](#))



MAGRITTE *The Silvered Chasm*, 1926 Oil on canvas, 29¼ × 25¼" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 12.2](#))

With increasing skill and deftness, Magritte's paintings deny us the perspective and material consistency we expect from the world. Sky and skin merge with wood grain. Holes open up in sides and walls and faces that reveal them to be no thicker than cardboard. "Despite the shifting abundance of detail and nuance in nature," he wrote in the autobiographical lecture "La Ligne de vie" (1938), "I was able to see a landscape as if it were only a curtain placed in front of me." His landscapes are painted scenery: his first Surrealist paintings coincide with a period, in 1925, when he was designing stage sets for an experimental theater. *The Difficult Crossing* (1926) holds flimsy stage flats and a

curtain and props like a severed hand and a painted *bilboquet*—a piece of turned wood topped with a ball, one of his several curious but insistently recurring motifs. The painting itself, however, is a weak piece of Surrealist clutter. A far more potent and concentrated picture painted the same year, *The Silvered Chasm*, satisfies and menaces the viewer with a sculptured consistency, a solidity within unreality; eyes that float free of spatial logic in earlier paintings are now shown as painted on a wooden block, their images turning the corners. An amorphous jigsawed hole, its perspective carefully rendered, opens onto a wrinkled metal wall decorated with another of Magritte's odd pet shapes—*grelots*, the small circular bells used on horse harnesses.

Though these paintings brim with a sense of human disquiet and of the hidden hand of *Homo faber* (even the sea seems an artifact, a painted backdrop), we are denied a sensation of human presence; rather, human absence is portrayed. Heads are pieces of wood; faces are rapt in the absentia of sleep; the famous heads of *The Lovers* (1928) are wrapped in cloth; what faces do show are expressionless, impassive in their mutilation. Magritte himself, in his self-portraits of 1928 and 1936 (*Attempting the Impossible*, *Clairvoyance*), is expressionless, as he seems to be in the photos taken of him as a young man. The catalogue text, by Sarah Whitfield, quotes a contemporary Belgian filmmaker, Jaco Van Dormael, as saying, "Belgium is an absence of identity." The Communist leanings of Magritte's Belgian Surrealist circle further deëmphasized individual identity and encouraged the group spirit of scientific inquiry. Magritte's man in a bowler is a kind of proletarianized bourgeois, a *Waste Land* cipher, and his own quiet style of life and painting, which he conducted in a corner of his house rather than in a separate studio, denied all Romantic and individualistic illusions concerning the artist. One of his circle, Louis Scutenaire, declared, "Magritte is not a painter," and another, Paul Nougé, said, "He is an *essentially* contestable painter." Indeed, compared with Matisse, whose color-mad megashow dazzles the throngs thirty blocks to the south in Manhattan these days, Magritte is not a painter. Matisse's paintings, like Vermeer's and Monet's and Cézanne's and Pollock's, are about painting, the peculiar paradise of color applied to canvas; Magritte does not paint for paint's sake, as Matisse does. Like a self-abnegating medieval artist, he wishes to

bring us through his subject matter into a realm of thought, of reconsidered being.



MAGRITTE *The Lovers*, 1928 Oil on canvas, 21 × 28½" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 12.3](#))

The eerie urban spaces of De Chirico and the deserts of Dalí with their bejewelled hallucinations were too vague for Magritte's pedagogic intent. He was an advertising artist and learned to simplify his images, to deliver one startling blow to our grazing attention. The lovers kissing with heads enwrapped in cloth like burial shrouds, the giant apple or rose taking up an entire little room, the mirror that reflects a man's back instead of his face, the face that is a woman's torso (her breasts the eyes and her pubic triangle the mouth), the boots that are also bare feet, the tuba that is on fire, the eye staring from the round slice of ham on the dinner plate, the landscape painting that exactly covers, on its easel, the piece of landscape it represents—these are consummate posings of the problem of, as he said, "how we see the world." "We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of it that we experience inside ourselves." Seeing is an epistemological puzzle in which "visible things always hide other visible things" and "our gaze always wants to penetrate further so as to see at last the object, the reason for our

existence.”

The Titanic Days (1928) is one of the few of his paintings about an experience rather than a perception. The experience appears to be rape: a naked woman is struggling with a man clad in a coat, who is only visible within her silhouette. The struggle therefore seems to be altogether within herself, and female erotic ambivalence is clearly implied by the painting's first, rejected title, "Fear of Love." Magritte's female nudes in general seem to be about (among other things) themselves. The advances his painting technique made in the Thirties can be measured in the distance between the naked torso in *A Courtesan's Palace* (1928) and that in *Representation* (1937). The first is a mere signifier, with a blocky anatomy and coarse skin, whereas the second is a real celebration, a silky mimicry of an Old Master, with a Renaissance reverence for the bared human form. In its form-fitting frame this abdomen, tawny as if under an aged varnish, becomes an icon, a sacred image.



MAGRITTE *The Son of Man*, 1964 Oil on canvas, 45¼ × 34¾" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 12.4](#))

Surrealism, like Freudianism, was full of sex; but Magritte's ominous eroticism perhaps needs a biographical gloss. When he was thirteen, his mother, after several unsuccessful suicide attempts, drowned herself in the Sambre River, which flowed past their home in the Belgian province of Hainaut—a drab region known as the Black Country. Her body was not recovered until seventeen days later, a kilometer downstream. Magritte seldom spoke of this misfortune, but, according to an account he gave

Scutenaire, “When the body was recovered her face was found to be covered by her nightdress.” This haunting detail may be a boy’s garbled recollection of a disfigured corpse’s concealment, or the projection backward of an adult’s obsessions. In any case, the many veiled or absent or exploded or impassive or averted heads of the paintings here have a psychic source, as well as the ubiquitous female torso, whose breasts and belly and pubic bush press, limbless and headless, at the windows of Magritte’s assemblages like a heavy vision of not quite attainable nurture. *Attempting the Impossible* is the title of his Pygmalion image—a self-portrait stiffly painting into existence his naked wife—and two other nudes from the same late Twenties are titled *The Elusive Woman* and *The Hidden Woman*. To a child, at the outset of adolescence, the mother’s suicide must have loomed as a deliberate and eternal denial.



MAGRITTE *The Titanic Days*, 1928 Oil on canvas, 45¼ × 31½" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 12.5](#))

As one moves through the chronologically arranged galleries, the paintings get jollier. *The Song of the Storm* (1937) makes us smile, with its tender joke of puffy clouds crawling along the earth beneath a clear sky showering rain, as do the reversed Madonna-Child heads of *The Mathematical Mind* (1936 or 1937).

The indoor murk lifts; Magritte's palette brightens. During the Second World War, to cheer himself up through the second German occupation of his life, he resorted to gaudy parody of Renoir, rendering a fleshy nude in a lurid rainbow of colors (*Treatise on Light*, 1943), and a godlike male *Ocean* (1943–44), with a miniature nude in the place of an erect penis, against a messy Renoiresque landscape. *Treatise on Sensation* (1944), of a young woman in a woodsy setting wearing a dress that melts into her breasts, demonstrates why Surrealism tends to a photographic style; here the viewer is uncertain if a physical anomaly is being represented or if Impressionistic blurring has let reality slip. These Renoir travesties, so violently departing from Magritte's usual precision and reserve, were deplored by otherwise sympathetic critics, and are deplorably ugly—though not as ugly as the Ensor-like grotesques in oil and gouache, with giant noses and plaid skies, that came after the war. Yet some paintings in this cartoon style of scrubby paint and thick outlines have a new erotic ease; *The Pebble*, from 1948, matter-of-factly shows a bare-torsoed woman licking her own shoulder while caressing her breast, and *Lola de Valence*, from the same year, gives its nude subject a classic beauty. In *Olympia* (1948), the female flesh, aglow with the kiss of the sun, is solid and sensual like few other figures in Magritte; nothing feels hidden but the question of whether or not a live mollusk is slimily present in the silver seashell placed on the reclining nude's belly, to her apparent delight.



MAGRITTE *Treatise on Sensation*, 1944 Oil on canvas, 31¼ × 25¼" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 12.6](#))



MAGRITTE *Memory of a Journey*, 1951 Oil on canvas, 31¼ × 25¼" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 12.7](#))



MAGRITTE *Personal Values*, 1952 Oil on canvas, 31¼ × 39" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 12.8](#))

All these divagations of style paid off, after 1950, in characteristic paintings done with a new spaciousness of effect. Absence, Magritte's original theme, became something like presence. A comic petrification, which seizes bottles and fruits and lightning bolts and men and lions, becomes the occasion of a triumphant return of congenial grisaille, in a flecked, skilled *trompe l'oeil* of stony metamorphosis (*The Haunted Castle*, *Memory of a Journey*). Huge boulders now, instead of trinkety *bilboquets*, serve as stand-ins for human presences (*The Invisible World*). The clouds that always fascinated him have become, with an astounding aptness, floating loaves of bread (*The Golden Legend*). An enlarged comb and goblet and pencil and bar of soap make a snug bourgeois family in a room wallpapered with fair-weather clouds; this last painting was given the title *Personal Values* by Paul Nougé, but was originally called "The Clear Field" by Magritte. A kind of clearing had indeed been reached. *The Dominion of Light* simply sets a darkened street of houses against the bright sky that still reigns above; we do not even register, at first, the surreality of the juxtaposition, since such contrasts

occur, if less extremely, in nature. The anonymous men in bowlers now float in a heavenly battalion, distributed above the gray tenements of Belgium as tidily as spots in three-dimensional wallpaper (*Golconda*).



MAGRITTE *Golconda*, 1953 Oil on canvas, 31¼ × 39" The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas (Illustration Credit 12.9)

All these were painted in the Fifties; the Sixties brought more superb recapitulations of his habitual motifs, amplified and unweighted. The world as stage, the metaphor of some of his earliest and least organized paintings, is now summed up as a continuous scroll of backdrop-thin sea and sky, terminating in a pair of curtains (*The Memoirs of a Saint*). The landscape within a landscape no longer disturbingly overlays nature with art but nestles art comfortably within nature—a canvas of trees set within a surround of leaves that one can imagine as clamorous applause (*The Waterfall*). The theme of the false mirror or window receives its culminating refinement in *The Field-Glass*: a double casement left ajar to reveal a strip of darkness, of *néant*, intervening in the splendid temporal illusion of sunlit ocean and sky. In *The Great Family*, the sky is now scissored in the shape of a

bird, an image accessible and benign enough to be adapted, by Magritte himself, into an insignia for Sabena Airlines—an apotheosis for the onetime ad artist. The hidden face, so fraught with trauma in its earlier manifestations, now belongs to the familiar man in the bowler, and is only partially obscured, by a drolly levitating green apple (*The Son of Man*).



MAGRITTE *The Endearing Truth*, 1966 Oil on canvas, 34¾ × 50¾" The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas ([Illustration Credit 12.10](#))

The theme of hiddenness itself and the idea of a lost horse-rider (a subject in 1926 and again in 1942) receive in *Carte Blanche* a fresh working in a stately piece of visual paradox, harking back to the selective silhouette of *The Titanic Days*, which for all its dancing optical tease has the tranquillity of a tapestry or a Seurat. And, the year before he died in 1967, Magritte painted perhaps his most solemn and moving work of *trompe l'oeil*, *The Endearing Truth* (a punning translation of *L'Aimable Vérité*, from Boileau's dictum "*Le vrai seul est aimable*"). A niched stone wall holds the image of a table and cloth whose painted perspective recalls that of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, which Magritte had just seen in Milan. The table holds with sacramental simplicity bread and wine and a bowl of Magritte's green apples; the complex impressions the severely simple image leaves—of offering, of weathering, of simultaneous flatness and depth, of absence and

presence—form a grand finale to the exhibit, whose last rooms produce such a stirring effect that another viewer spontaneously turned to me and exclaimed, “These are not dreams; they are the truth! Magritte was a philosopher! He was a *good man*!”



MAGRITTE *Megalomania*, 1967 Bronze, height 60½" Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 72.182 ([Illustration Credit 12.11](#))



MAGRITTE *Megalomania*, 1949 Oil on canvas, 39 × 31¼" The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas ([Illustration Credit 12.12](#))

The excitement of these final rooms is enhanced by the three large pieces of sculpture they contain. In his last year, the catalogue tells us, Magritte was approached by his dealer Alexander Iolas about the possibility of making sculptures of his images. Magritte, who had painted women on wine bottles and designs on plaster heads, consented, and offered eight conceptions in ballpoint sketch, which were executed in wax by a foundry in Verona. Though Magritte's hand did not do the modelling, he visited the foundry and made some alterations in the wax casts and signed them; they were cast in bronze two

months after his death. *Megalomania* embodies an idea he had first painted in 1927, of a woman's body in segments nested one within another. As a painted image, it is one more manipulation of body parts denied unity, of a body denied a head; as a large sculpture, it stands as a monument to the female form, as worshipful as a Maillol or a Lachaise—a magnificent telescope of a rump giving birth to a smaller abdomen giving birth in turn to an armless, headless torso. David's "*Madame Récamier*" is drier, a joke that substitutes a bent coffin on the famous chaise longue for her graceful body, but the joke goes deep. A photograph of the aging Magritte in these last rooms shows him smiling, and it is hard not to sense a joy of accomplishment in the last works displayed. Out of anxiety, uncertainty, and awareness of nothingness, he had generated images that, recurrently explored, acquired a resonant somethingness, an endearing truth.

Magritte, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, September 12–November 12, 1992.



CLAES OLDENBURG *Clothespin* (1 of 3), 1974 Cor-ten and stainless steel, 120 × 44 × 24" Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis, 85.510 ([Illustration Credit 13.0](#))

A Case of Monumentality

CLAES OLDENBURG'S *Clothespin* (1975) stands in the Art Institute of Chicago's palatial halls like a Cyclopean, ten-foot-tall security guard, his gracefully tapered legs braced apart, his spring ready to snap. But the resemblance is incidental, we feel; Oldenburg is too much the engineer and architectural draftsman to be after anything less than the *Ding an sich*, the thing in itself. His plaster hamburgers, his canvas telephones, his giant typewriter-erasers and baseball bats and electrical switches and plugs all have an elemental solemnity that disdains anthropomorphism and beckons us into the mute, inhuman world of artifacts. Oldenburg's sculptures look made, and concern made things.

Somewhat as Renaissance draftsmen like Michelangelo and Dürer "blew up" natural details such as flowers, rabbits, and human musculature under the microscope of their close attention, after the long inattention of the Middle Ages, so the Pop Artists, after the mystic self-absorption of the Abstract Impressionists, turned to the circumambient reality of nature, and enlarged it with artistic focus. Their nature, however, was of human manufacture: Jasper Johns dignified flags and beer cans; Andy Warhol transferred to canvas the trash imagery of tabloids and advertising; Roy Lichtenstein seized upon the Benday dots, primary colors, and emphatic outlines of comic strips. There was a joy of reclamation in Pop Art, a relieved embrace of the tangible world after the monkish austerities and tragic mood of action painting. Nothing was too lowly to notice—bottle caps, dollar bills, junk food, crushed cars—and to elevate into the museum of the cherishable. Robert Rauschenberg, with such infamous *trouvés* as the stuffed angora goat girdled by an old tire, showed the way; his masters in the Zen contemplation of the conundrum of art were Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. Pop Art had, in Dada, an intellectual pedigree. But a number of Pop Artists were doing what came naturally—Warhol had been a commercial artist, James Rosenquist a billboard painter—and the movement had an unforced connection with American folk art, as

it had moved from handmade nineteenth-century artifacts to twentieth-century articles of mass manufacture. Among its several messages *Clothespin* is telling us that this humble utilitarian device is elegant and beautiful.



CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI *The Kiss*, 1909 Stone, height 35¼" Montparnasse Cemetery, Paris ([Illustration Credit 13.1](#))

Irony is a way of having one's cake while appearing to eat it. An effect of Oldenburg's raising the clothespin to monumentality is to mock the concept of monumentality, which has thrust upon Mankind's weary vision so many bloated colossi, emperors' effigies, mounted bronze heroes, gesturing Lenins, gilded Buddhas, and similar ponderous advertisements of creed and hegemony. The monumental asserts establishment values, not only against contemporary dissent but against the erosion of time, unmindful that all monuments become, eventually, the enigmatic pillars of Ozymandias. Eternalization, when applied to an implement for pinching damp clothes to a line, becomes comic, as is this heroic solitude of an item useful only in numbers and generally clustered in a box or basket. The Art Institute's context of stately Doric gallery underlines the satire.

Yet is satire the only point? A true monumentality is achieved. Our childhood apprehensions of reality are revived in the disproportionate glorification of the overlookable; a child overlooks nothing near him, and the contours and mechanism of a clothespin, say, impress him with a huge, though unspeakable, significance. The mute significance of things gives the visual arts their inexhaustible impetus; the visible world, so abundant and heedless around us, is processed, by the painter's or sculptor's hand, and becomes understood. This act of understanding is the light that representation gives off, and that draws millions to rotate through museums, delighting in recognitions. We recognize the clothespin, even though it has been idealized in Cor-ten and stainless steel, enlarged in size, and placed upside down from the way we usually see it on the clothesline. The recognition is fringed and flavored by what art history we possess—by whatever analogies to the Eiffel Tower or Brancusi's *Kiss* arise—but there is no escaping the *Ding an sich*. As with Oldenburg's forty-five-foot clothespin near City Hall in Philadelphia, or the hundred-foot baseball bat that adorns Chicago, a humble bit of our lives is given large public dignity, in a kind of democratic revolution.



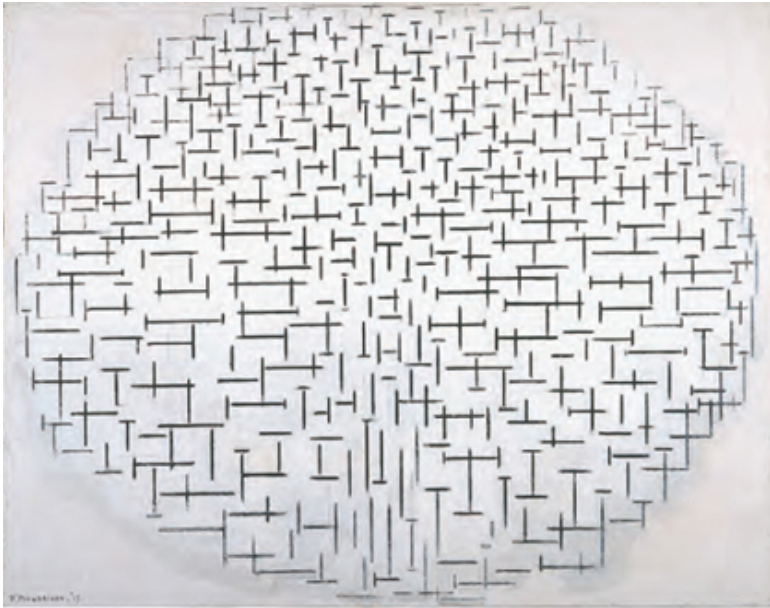
OLDENBURG *Clothespin* (3 of 3), 1975 Cor-ten and stainless steel, 120 × 44 × 24"
Gift of the Auxiliary Board of The Art Institute of Chicago Mr. and Mrs. Frank
G. Logan Prize Fund, 1976.96 ([Illustration Credit 13.2](#))



ROY LICHTENSTEIN *Masterpiece*, 1962 Oil on canvas, 54 × 54" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 14.0](#))

Big, Bright, and Bendayed

IN ATTENDING the Roy Lichtenstein retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, I made a mistake: imagining that the exhibit, like most I have viewed in that cunning spiral, would begin at the top, I took the elevator up, and found myself not at Lichtenstein's beginnings as an artist but flung headlong into his latest, slickest phase. A quiet sign beckoned me yet upward, through one of the Guggenheim's cavelike archways, and I was in a large room holding large canvases from the 1990s—meticulous crystallizations, or visual embalmings, of prototypical American living quarters. It was without doubt the best-illuminated, brightest room in my museumgoing experience; had I stayed in it longer, I might have acquired a tan. However, the paintings, with their wrought-iron outlines and industrial-quality Benday dots and prefab stripes, and their squared-off sofas and end tables, and their stark little simplifications of name-brand artworks, including some of Lichtenstein's, did not invite lingering contemplation, and I plunged impatiently on the smooth slope downward, in search of the comic-strip enlargements that are Lichtenstein's deathless contribution to contemporary art.



PIET MONDRIAN *Composition 10 in Black and White*, 1915 Oil on canvas, 33½ × 42½" Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands ([Illustration Credit 14.1](#))



Alas, they were near the bottom of the long unwinding ribbon of viewing space, and to get to them I had to pass by, not always impatiently, three decades' worth of the variations that the ingenious, hardworking artist has rung upon his single idea—the transportation into high art of reproduced commercial art's mechanical look. Nighttime was settling into the world beyond Frank Lloyd Wright's impregnable, top-shaped fortress. The Guggenheim stays open late, in keeping with its jazzy structure, and it must be said that never have I seen artworks as comfortably resplendent in its gargantuan coils as these poster-bold big canvases of Lichtenstein's. Back and forth they blatantly signalled across the well of space, ignoring the shadowy, shuffling forms of us pedestrian art-lovers, who had trooped into the dusk to be dwarfed and cowed once more by the aloof majesty of the modern masters, in this case Wright and Lichtenstein. A museum designed in splendid disdain of the art it houses, and an art which, in the words of the monitory lecture lettered on the wall, is devoted to "conveying an ironic, anti-aesthetic attitude, and capturing a look of 'insincerity'"—they were made for each other. Gaudy as a circus, the silent spectacle was well worth the pilgrimage to Ninetieth Street. In these days when a cultural event must have a very high gloss to catch the eye, the Lichtenstein show bedazzles.

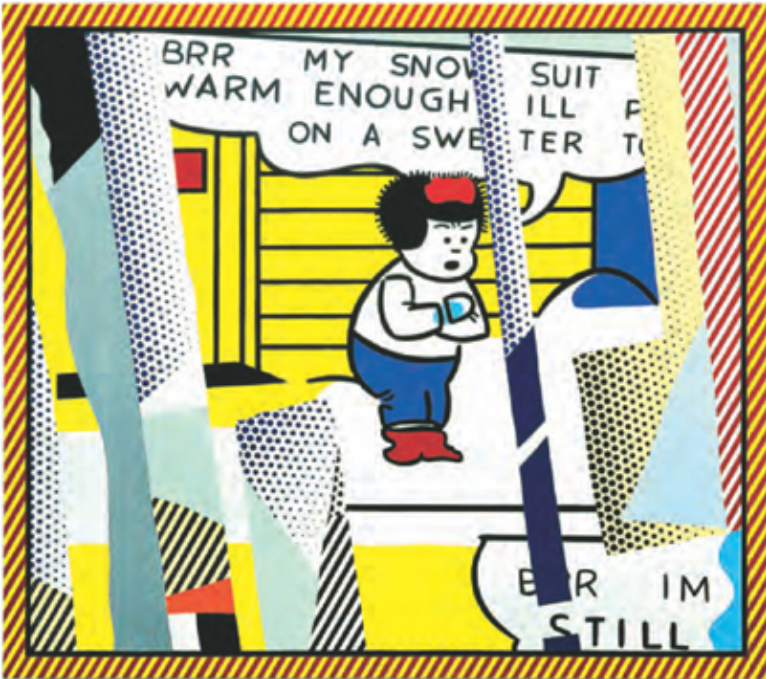
And yet—to get back to my wrong-ended perambulation—paintings so steadfastly ironical, so exclusively devoted to the reduction of derived imagery, to the reprocessing of existing art, flicker across the attention with a certain monotony. The reality is always two-dimensional, the smile always dry. The dryness of the two *Plus and Minus* canvases (1988) may be wasted on those viewers who do not recognize the allusion to Piet Mondrian's *Composition 10 in Black and White* (1915), an abstraction composed of short black lines intermittently forming plus and minus signs—a pattern evoked by Lichtenstein in a Benday pattern, employed in his other late paintings, of small bricklike shapes. And not every pilgrim to the Guggenheim may recognize, in Lichtenstein's *Reflections on Nancy* (1989), the close parroting of the acrylic by Andy Warhol which, with four other, similar

canvases placed in a Bonwit Teller window in 1961, signalled the possibility of comic-strip characters as subjects for high art (beyond serving as elements in collages, as in some of Robert Rauschenberg's). Warhol's paintings, however, were part of a window display by an established commercial artist; it was Lichtenstein who, against the initial reservations of the dealer Leo Castelli, first presented painted comic-strip enlargements as worthy to adorn a wall—or, as the artist put it in an interview with *ARTnews* in 1983, as canvases that were too “despicable” to hang, executed by a knowledgeable student of art who was “anti-contemplative, anti-nuance, anti-getting-away-from-the-tyranny-of-the-rectangle, anti-movement and -light, anti-mystery, anti-paint-quality, anti-Zen, and anti-all of those brilliant ideas of preceding movements which every-one understands so thoroughly.”

But of course the art establishment loves nothing better than packageable anti-establishmentarianism, and Lichtenstein's paradoxical position is that of an instant classic who is still lampooning other classics, in a manner that has become pedantic. He is probably right in his expecting his audience to be art-savvy enough to catch his allusions to Monet, van Gogh, Picasso, Léger, Matisse, Magritte, Gino Severini, Carlo Carrà, etc. Even if the audience were not, an artist's obligation is to focus on what interests him, and to produce what pleases him. Spectators can only stand by, and applaud (and pay) or not. Yet Lichtenstein's recent recycling of his own earlier work, along with that of other artists, by means of overlaying their all-too-well-known images with irregular strips of Benday pattern (the *Reflections* Series, e.g., *Nurse*, 1988, and *Whaam!*, 1990), seems a rather desperate variation on a picture-making technique whose charm was always its impudent thinness. Descending the Guggenheim's grand helix, one sees dots before the eyes, and sometimes not much else. Standing in front of one of his *Mirrors* from the early Seventies—ovals empty but for dim diagonal dottings—one feels, as if standing near a hissing airplane door, in danger of being sucked out by the vacuity.



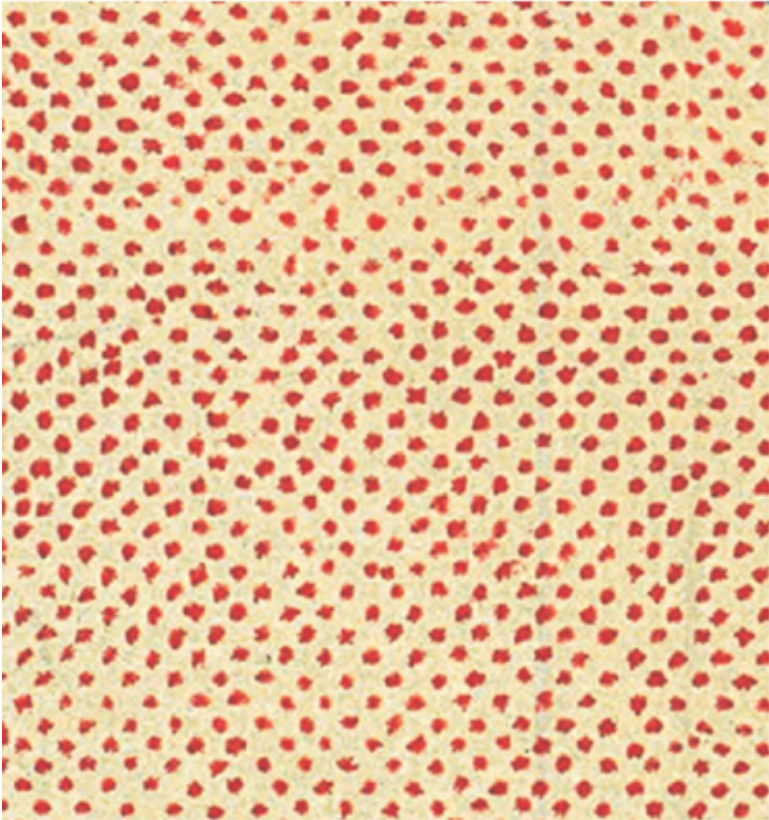
ANDY WARHOL *Nancy*, 1961 Acrylic on canvas, 48 × 60" Private collection
([Illustration Credit 14.3](#))



LICHTENSTEIN *Reflections on Nancy*, 1989 Oil and Magna on canvas, 48 × 54½"
Private collection ([Illustration Credit 4.4](#))

Benday is properly Ben Day, named after its inventor, Benjamin Day (1838–1916), a New York printer who conceived of introducing tones of gray into photoengraving by means of small regular patterns of dots or stipples. Cartoonists and illustrators can purchase patterns in Benday sheets that are transparent and adhesive and, laid upon the inked-in drawing, can be carved with a razor blade or an X-Acto knife to the shape desired. Lichtenstein's defining stroke of genius was to enlarge Benday dots into a motif. At first, they were dabbed on by brush; then the bristles of a dog brush were dipped in paint and canvas, pressed against the canvas, giving a noticeable panelled appearance not present in real Bendayed reproductions. Also, in such early works as *Black Flowers* and *Girl with Ball* (both 1961), the dots are smaller than the enlarged scale calls for. By 1962, the dots have regularized, and by 1963, Lichtenstein had developed a method whereby manufactured stencils were employed by assistants. His trend has been toward bigger and more various patterns; they

now include closely packed large dots, dots tapering in size from row to row, stripes, the brick pattern previously mentioned, and a particularly ugly fake wood grain echoing that found in Cubist collages.



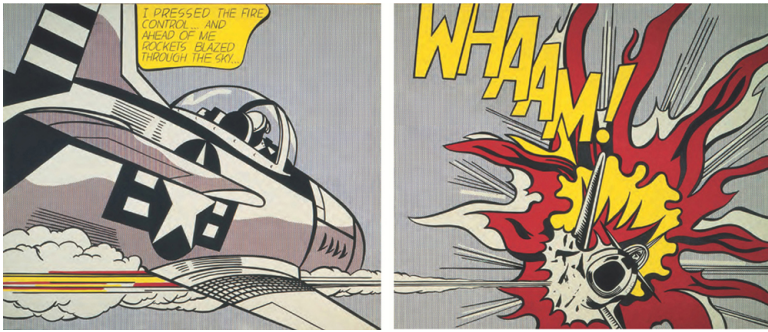
(Illustration Credit 14.5)



LICHTENSTEIN *Girl with Ball*, 1961 Oil on canvas, 60¼ × 36¼" The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson, 421.1981 (Illustration Credit 14.6)

Much of the handwork is still executed by Lichtenstein; at least, a charming little video that runs in a side room at the Guggenheim shows Lichtenstein fondly filling in black circles and thick uniform outlines, while he assures the camera of the joy he takes in his craft. Such manual labor to produce an effect of mechanism argues for a kind of sainthood and suggests an unexpected affinity with the Performance Art that was contemporaneous with the beginnings of Pop Art: like the constructions destroyed in their performance, Lichtenstein's brushwork vanishes in the finished product. "I want my painting to look as if it has been programmed. I want to hide the record of my hand."

One comes away from the video liking Lichtenstein more for having seen it, and more prepared to consider his canvases as aesthetic objects, as well as effective attention-getters and counters in the ever-complicating game of modern art. The film shows him turning a Dagwood painting in outline upside down, to consider the composition abstractly, and a number of his paintings—the famous *Whaam!* (1963), *We Rose Up Slowly* (1964), *Still Life with Glass and Peeled Lemon* (1972), *Go for Baroque* (1979)—impress us with the powerful rightness and, somehow, the *pressure* of their composition. From the comic-strip panel he learned how to use the canvas to the brim. The catalogue, with a thorough and attentive, if rather pious and solemn, text by Diane Waldman, enables us to compare the paintings with their originals in advertising and comic-book art and bears out Lichtenstein's claim that "My work is actually different from comic strips in that every mark is really in a different place, however slight the difference seems to some. The difference is often not great, but it is crucial." Crucial, perhaps, but often so small that one wonders where the copyright lawyers for the comic-book companies have been sleeping all these years. The shock value of these painterly enlargements of single comics panels is diminished in reproduction, where they sink back toward the size of their models; perhaps not so paradoxically, an art based upon reproduction loses its punch when reproduced.



LICHTENSTEIN *Whaam!* (diptych), 1963 Oil and Magna on canvas, each panel 68 × 83" Tate Gallery, London ([Illustration Credit 14.7](#), [14.8](#))

Descending, I was pleasantly surprised by the sculpture, which perforce has to step out of the two-dimensional shell game and compete in the world of objects. The Bendayed stripes become bars of painted bronze, and the visual puns—on Matisse in *Goldfish Bowl II* (1978), on a Minoan mural in *Archaic Head VI* (1989)—become transformations, arousing our sense of weight and materials. The polka-dotted ceramic heads and chunky coffee cups, complete with ceramic coffee and saucer and spoon, have the charm of classic Pop sculpture, by Claes Oldenburg and Jasper Johns, with the patented Lichtenstein dottiness. Blessedly free of Benday and of any overt reference to his paintings are the witty and elegant brass pieces from the late Sixties, homage to the Art Deco décor of Thirties movie palaces, complete with velvet rope. Art Deco is the one formal style that Lichtenstein cannot burlesque, since its geometric cleanness and streamlining snugly fit his predilections. Canvases like *Modern Painting with Classic Head* (1967) and *Preparedness* (1968) make it on their own, as it were, as impressive and energetic compositions. The second, in three panels, is based on the WPA murals of the Thirties, and Lichtenstein in an interview took some pains to establish his correct distance from it: “You realize I’m not serious about defending our shore against foreign devils, as these works would imply. But the purpose isn’t only the reverse. It is also a statement about ‘heroic’ composition.”



LICHTENSTEIN *Ceramic Sculpture 2*, 1965 Glazed ceramic, height 3½" Private collection ([Illustration Credit 14.9](#))



LICHTENSTEIN *Little Big Painting*, 1965 Oil and Magna on canvas, 68 × 80"
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchased with funds from the
 Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art, 66.2 (Illustration Credit
 14.10)

The purpose isn't only the reverse: this statement is a useful corrective to Ms. Waldman's single-minded drift, which casts Lichtenstein as a satirist and counterinsurgent whose purpose has been "to celebrate the absurd aspects of our cultural condition" and "to confront the clichés of art." Her commentary does not much allow for the multidetermination of the artistic impulse; it can satirize and memorialize at the same time, reconcile scorn with affection. Even the *Brushstrokes*, of the mid-Sixties, which present a hilarious deflation of Abstract Expressionism's splashing, dripping dramatization of the painter's process—the brushstroke as heroic event—also constitute a tribute, an outburst of the very energy that the literalist, static rendering mocks.

When we arrive, a bit dizzy, on the last curves of the helix, at the comic-book paintings with which Lichtenstein made his mark, we find a far more complicated mood than travesty. At least our own response is in some significant fraction inextricable from our

reaction to these panels as if we were encountering them in a comic book; the disjunct moments of melodrama (“It’s ... it’s not an *engagement ring*. Is it?”; “Forget it! Forget me! I’m fed up with your kind!”) catch us up in their narrative: Is it? What kind? The war scenes (*Whaam!*; *Takka Takka*; *Okay, Hot-Shot!*) are thrilling, in their Second World War all-out murderousness; the true-romance heroines, the stylized girls with their globular tears and blue-black or black-yellow hair, are alluring in their emotional throes, each an “archetypical” woman, in Lichtenstein’s phrase. To Ms. Waldman, they are stonily “products of a culture that puts celluloid glamour and consumer objects before human dignity and individual or collective achievement” and victims of “society’s codification of women as ornaments, positioned for the male gaze only.” Far be it from me to deny Lichtenstein whatever Nineties-style political correctness he achieved in the early Sixties, when these images were created; but I think that to deny that our amusement and interest in them coincides with that of average comic-book readers would be as silly as denying that our interest in painted or sculpted nudes derives in part from prurience.



LICHTENSTEIN *Oval Mirror 6' x 3' #3*, 1971 Oil and Magna on canvas, 72 x 36"
Private collection ([Illustration Credit 14.11](#))

Pop Art won its public because it descended from abstraction and showed us our world—its artifacts, its trash, its billboards, its standardized romantic imagery. In seizing upon cartoon images with their flat color and outlines as a way to free himself from Abstract Expressionism, Lichtenstein did not opt for sheer nullity—otherwise, he would have kept painting black-and-white golf balls, balls of twine, and composition-book covers innocent of any human drama, or would have stuck with Mickey Mouse and Wimpy instead of aping the more realistically drawn romance and war comics. His anti-expressionist comic-book paintings nevertheless have an expressive content, including, for those of Lichtenstein's generation, a considerable quotient of nostalgia. The presiding mood of campy remove co-exists with the comic-book vitality, the vitality of folk art. As the decades dissolve the context of contemporary-art politics, the more primitive underlying art remains. Having it both ways, Lichtenstein has said, "Once I have established what the subject matter is going to be I am not interested in it anymore, although I want it to come through with the immediate impact of the comics." This underlying impact, to be found at the bottom of the Guggenheim spiral, pervades the oeuvre, though ever more weakly, as the postmodern painter with his studied manipulations displaced the unsung comic-book artists he appropriated.



LICHTENSTEIN *In the Car*, 1963 Oil and Magna on canvas, 68 × 80" Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh ([Illustration Credit 14.12](#))

Roy Lichtenstein, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, October 8, 1993–January 16, 1994.



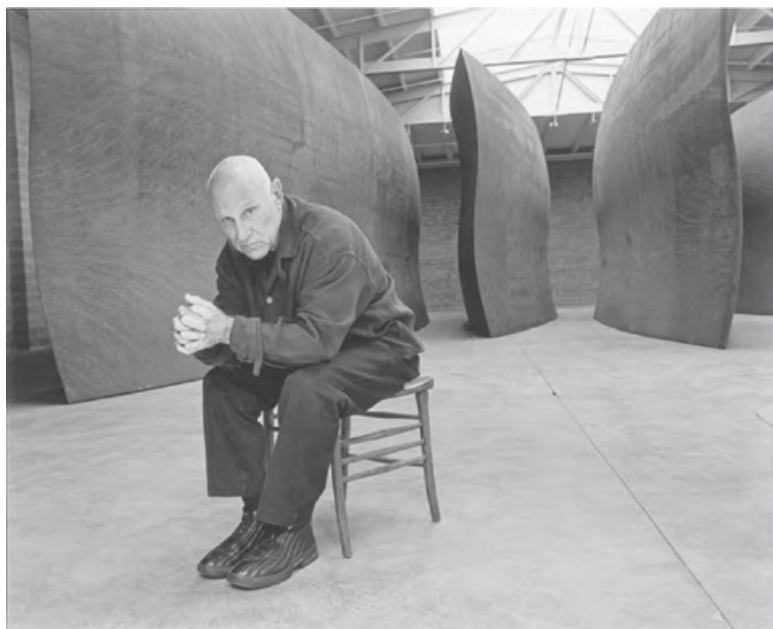
RICHARD SERRA *Sequence*, 2006 Weatherproof steel, 12'9" × 40'8" × 65'2", plate 2" thick Collection of the artist ([Illustration Credit 15.0](#))

Serra's Triumph

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, the show is a triumph, the biggest interactive art event in Manhattan since Christo's saffron flags fluttered in a wintry Central Park over two years ago. The day your reviewer attended the Richard Serra retrospective, a sunny Monday in June, the two large sculptures in MoMA's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden were crowded with young families, small children, and hopeful couples negotiating hand in hand the narrow passageways of *Intersection II* (1992–93) or jollily huddling in the crescent of shade inside the sun-baked interior space of *Torqued Ellipse IV* (1998). The holiday, playground atmosphere surprised me, armed with a notebook and steeled, so to speak, to cope manfully with towering masses of metal and the great weight of art-historical importance that more timely reviewers had already assigned to the sculptor and his displayed works ("Not only our greatest sculptor but an artist whose subject is greatness befitting our time"—Peter Schjeldahl; "A landmark, by a titan of sculpture, one of the last great modernists in an age of minor talents, mad money, and so much meaningless art"—Michael Kimmelman). Indeed, I was so intent on properly absorbing these marvels that I tripped over a stray toddler and nearly booted him into the rectangular, mercifully shallow pond at whose edge MoMA has posed Aristide Maillol's silvery nude statue *The River*. This beloved allegorical figure, by the way, is the only customary resident of the Sculpture Garden who has not been swept away from his or her spot by the invasion of Serra's big steel; even the trees, especially a feathery sweet locust inches from a jutting angle of *Torqued Ellipse IV*, look intimidated.

Surprising, too, was the wealth of textural incidents with which the twelve-foot walls of weatherproofed steel are spectacularly marked, or marred. On the two pieces outdoors in the Sculpture Garden, the weatherproofing, a brittle bluish film, is more worn off than not; lichenous orange blooms of rust have proliferated, and long rivulets of moisture have left ruddy rippling tear-trails down the slant surfaces of two-and-a-half-inch steel. Their basic

coat of rust is a velvety reddish brown and looks fuzzy and eerily weightless compared with, say, David Smith's rather implacable welded constructions—those squarish slabs of circularly burnished bare metal—and Anthony Caro's riveted, sometimes gaudily painted beams and industrial fragments. Serra's early artistic training, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and then at Yale, was in painting: the fittingly massive catalogue (it accompanies the show but contains photographs of many more works than are in it) prints a conversation with the museum curator Kynaston McShine in which the sculptor recalls, "I ended up in my last year painting something that looked like, oh, renditions of Abstract Expressionism, somewhere between Pollock and de Kooning." To another interviewer he has confided, "I was no slouch as a painter," and pointed out "that he beat classmates Chuck Close and Brice Marden to a Yale traveling fellowship." (Nor is he a slouch at theorizing; he says himself, "I came up with a generation of artists who wrote....We had a need to write about the issues involved in our work and we wanted to encourage critical dialogue. My generation dealt with analytical language more than generations that had come before or for that matter after.")



MARY ELLEN MARK *Richard Serra, Brooklyn, New York, 2004* Silver gelatin print
Collection of the artist ([Illustration Credit 15.1](#))

Surveying the many square meters of curved steel, one encounters passages of flaking waterproofing that resemble the flaky vertical canvases of Clyfford Still, and other sections as luminously blobby and drippy as oils by Sam Francis. The striped stains of Morris Louis also come to mind. One would like to know how many of these picturesque effects were the blind work of weather and accident (bumptious youngsters have left dusty sneaker-prints on lower portions of *Torqued Ellipse IV*, and the giant crane that lifted it over the garden wall from Fifty-fourth Street left marks of its clamp at the top) and how many, if any, were induced by the sculptor. Certainly Serra is not above leaving chalked numbers, Pop-style, on some of his steel plates—see the prominently displayed assemblage *Five Plates, Two Poles* (1971) in the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington—and a number of parallel shadows in the larger pieces at MoMA do seem more than accidental.



SERRA *Intersection II*, 1992–93 Weatherproof steel, four conical sections inverted relative to each other, each approximately 13' × 51', plate 2½" thick The

Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, 503.1998 ([Illustration Credit 15.2](#))



([Illustration Credit 15.3](#))



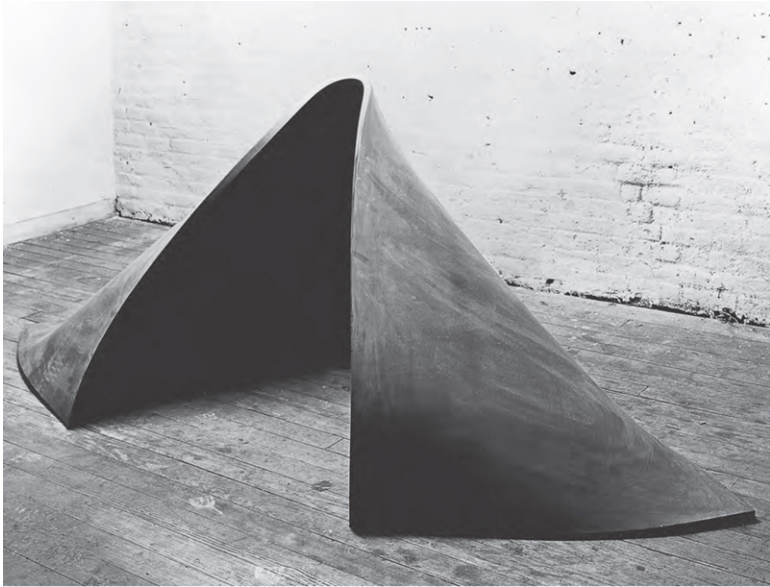
SERRA *Torqued Ellipse IV*, 1998 Weatherproof steel, 11'9" × 22'6" × 35'7", plate 2" thick The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Promised gift of Leon and Debra Black ([Illustration Credit 15.4](#))

In any case, how do the visual stimulations of these two outdoor pieces differ from those to be obtained by walking around a shipyard where some weary freighters have come to rest? A determinedly industrial art like Serra's risks confusion with the products of industry themselves. What impressions do they offer unobtainable by a sensitive observer in a railroad yard, or underneath a highway overpass, or at the mouth of a tunnel? There, the scale is greater than any that can be matched by a lone artificer, and the sensations even more dizzying, if dizziness is the desired effect. Passing from the sixth-floor portion of the Serra exhibition, one can gaze down the depth of the museum's atrium, to the people-speckled second floor and the foreshortened top of Barnett Newman's rusted-steel sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963–69), for a truly visceral sensation of depth and volume. Art can never overtop reality's dimensions. To be sure, rusty freighters can be viewed aesthetically, especially if the observer is Joseph Conrad or the Colombian writer Álvaro Mutis, whose own experience of shipping had redolences of the distances and hazards of the sea and the fog-shrouded gallantry of seafarers.

Serra's rusty slices of grandeur, however, awakened in me nagging worries about how the German steelmakers precisely warped such vast plates, and how much the process cost, and who paid, and how the cumbersome products were packaged and transported. Mysteries, to be sure, but perhaps not fruitfully mysterious. The giant Serra book ignores them; besides the adroit and charming interview with Serra it contains weighty philosophical/topological/ontological essays on Serra's earlier work, his "abstract thinking," and his sculptures in landscape, by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, John Rajchman, and co-editor Lynne Cooke respectively, but almost no concrete information about how the works were made. Serra seems to hand cardboard models to a German foundry, and out pop the ten, or twenty, or hundred tons of properly bent steel.* He told Charlie Rose in a television interview that no steel company left in this country can handle the job. Everything except the words manufactured *about* the sculptures is produced offshore.

The sixth floor displays the works, from the late Sixties to the mid-Nineties, when torqued (a computer-enabled advance over merely curved) steel became his *métier*. He began as a child of Pollock, hurling hot lead from a ladle against the base of a wall

and hanging on the wall tangles of rubber belting. In a bygone New York of low rents and serendipitous *trouvailles*, “a rubber warehouse was emptying out on West Broadway,” as Serra tells it, “and I phoned the manager of the company and asked if I could cart the rubber away.” For someone with Serra’s theoretical bent, rubber was a boon: “It has a flexibility,” he says, “that allows you to readily deal with line, plane, volume, and gravity. It delivers potential to your fingertips.” He realized one sculptural masterpiece with it: *To Lift* (1967), named from a long list of procedural verbs (to roll, to crease, to twist, to lift, etc.) that he drew up to jump-start his career, is a powerfully ominous hood- or tent-shape created simply by lifting up one edge of a thick sheet of vulcanized rubber in the center and letting it stand. A stunt of sorts, it was followed by various gravity-defying sheets and tubes of lightly rolled lead leaned in such a way as to be mutually supporting (*Floor Pole Prop*, 1969; *Shovel Plate Prop*, 1969). The arrangements became more elaborate and free-standing, eye-teasers with a nod to Op Art; massive yet precarious-looking, four are enclosed on MoMA’s sixth floor in a low Plexiglas wall, presumably to protect them from a toppling touch by the same urchins who left sneaker prints on *Torqued Ellipse IV*. The pieces are as defiant of gravity as their titles are cryptic: *5:30*; *1-1-1-1*; *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*; *V+5: To Michael Heizer*, all from 1969. Lead has the virtue of being almost as easily worked as cloth (*Folded, Unfolded*, 1969), but outdoor projects led Serra to the tougher medium of steel.



SERRA *To Lift*, 1967 Vulcanized rubber 36" × 80" × 60" Collection of the artist
([Illustration Credit 15.5](#))

In 1970, the year when he worked with his friend Robert Smithson in staking out Smithson's renowned earthwork *Spiral Jetty*, Serra won a grant for an urban earthwork in the Bronx: "I found a dead-end street at 183rd and Webster Avenue and built a steel circle flush with the asphalt." In a photograph of the seedy site, amid cracked paving, parked cars, and drifts of street trash, the half-flanged ring, its diameter of twenty-six feet stretching nearly curb to curb, has a certain unearthly beauty—a halo left behind by an oversize visiting angel. The volume accompanying the exhibition holds photographs of many other site installations, some almost swallowed by the land whose contours they emphasize, and others, like the ill-fated *Tilted Arc* (1981) in Manhattan's Federal Plaza, all too dominant of their environment. *Tilted Arc* made the news when office-workers from nearby buildings protested that their space for lunch and leisure had been brutally cut in half by the great dark wall of weatherproofed steel, which was finally removed or, as its listing rather indignantly puts it, "Destroyed by the United States Government, 1989." Though such aggressive scale defies museum capacities, Serra's brutalism is well enough represented on the sixth floor by

the two giant plates of *Delineator* (1974–75), one on the floor and the other, at right angles to it, stuck on the ceiling, and by the four stark plates of *Circuit II* (1971–84), taking up the whole, from center to corners, of the considerable room that holds them. As MoMA's handout pamphlet states, *Circuit II* "sets up a new environment for the viewer, who is forced to move through the spaces created by the work."



SERRA *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted*, 1970 Hot-rolled steel, 26' diameter, rim 8" wide; installed at 183rd Street and Webster Avenue, the Bronx, 1970–71. St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri ([Illustration Credit 15.6](#))



SERRA *Tilted Arc*, 1981 Weatherproof steel, 12' × 120', plate 2½" thick;
installed in Federal Plaza, New York, N.Y., 1981–89; destroyed by
commissioning patron, the U.S. government, in 1989 ([Illustration Credit 15.7](#))

This curious idea, of forcing the viewer to walk in a certain way, and achieving thereby a reformation or enhancement of his inner life, follows from Serra's long-held antipathy to sculpture as the creation of visual objects. Duchamp, by presenting a urinal or bottle rack as a piece of art, made it "a fetish for display." Worse and "most disturbing" to Serra, such display "retains the hierarchy of the object, and as a consequence art objects become life-style accessories." Instead, the *process* of viewing is taken as central, just as the processes of lifting, rolling, bending, and splashing were central to Serra's first ventures into art. As he disarmingly and epigrammatically admits of this fledgling era, "The residues of the activities didn't always qualify as art."



SERRA *Torqued Torus Inversion*, 2006 Weatherproof steel, two sculptures, each 12'9" × 36'1" × 26'6½", plate 2" thick Collection of the artist ([Illustration Credit 15.8](#))

But the massive residues of his (and the German steelworkers') activities in the new century, in his sixth decade, do so qualify. The new MoMA's second floor, where an extra-high, extra-weight-bearing room was built specifically to house the massive constructions and installations of contemporary art, supports three Serra masterpieces from 2006: *Band*, a continuous wall winding through four loops, forming four nearly enclosed spaces; *Torqued Torus Inversion*, two later, matched variations of the torqued ellipse in the Sculpture Garden; and *Sequence*, two intertwined S-shapes with a sinuous path between them. *Sequence* most remarkably and completely achieves Serra's anti-pictorial program for sculpture; it can be walked through but not visualized, as even *Band* can be mapped in the mind's eye. Serra explained to his interviewer Kynaston McShine:

At both ends you have the choice of entering through one of two openings. One will lead you to the containment of an interior space; the other will direct you into a seemingly endless path between two leaning walls. You cannot recollect or reconstruct a definite memory of the curvilinear path that connects one spiral to the other, nor of the interior spaces of the two spirals. You cannot map the piece after you've walked it.



SERRA *Band*, 2006 Weatherproof steel, 12'9" × 36'5" × 71'9½", plate 2" thick
Collection of the artist ([Illustration Credit 15.9](#))

So it was; two ambulations left me no wiser. The walls lean in and out above and around you, and other bemused wanderers are encountered in spaces now narrow (producing a mild anxiety), now wide (and peaceful, like an inner courtyard); but not even some vivid passages of varied rust, including pale patches like mildew, make it a primarily visual experience. In an attempt to see, as I moved through I let my eyes go out of focus and watched the angle of curved steel ahead of me change in an animated slow motion. As Serra says, "It feels as if you are being subjected to an accelerated gravitational pull." John Rajchman's essay "Serra's Abstract Thinking" explains:

Serra's abstraction is not an eidetic extraction from objects' forms and shapes. It is experiential and experimental, a great machine that affects our bodies and brains directly, rather than "moving" us indirectly through what it represents.

The image of a machine recurs: "His works become gigantic steel exercises in thinking, great rusting machines in which the coordinates of natural or habitual perception are scrambled and undone—but in such a way that one exits strangely refreshed."

The process could not be more sympathetically explicated. Only after one emerges from these ingeniously destabilized spaces does a question of disproportion arise. All this steel devoted to scrambling our habitual perceptions? Wouldn't the funhouse or Ferris wheel at the country fair do just as well? Didn't Cubism

and Surrealism do it a century ago with little flat canvases? These “great rusting machines” in their mightiness of weight and extent compare to the huge statues men have erected to Buddha, pharaohs, and, off Manhattan’s shore, the idea of liberty. In the absence of any content that would confirm a public in its ideology, the goal is—to quote the devoted Rajchman again—“a new sort of visceral intelligence,” “another kind of experience normally unavailable to us.” Is this objective enough for a form of art, large-scale sculpture, that is usually directed away from the purely private sensibility?

To reach the Serra show the museumgoer has to pass a tall wall covered with satirical graffiti, by the Romanian Dan Perjovschi, concerning the United States and its frivolous capitalism. As one of my fellow travellers through the Serra show asked, gesturing at the cunning, triumphal, and luxuriously grand artifacts around us, “Isn’t this capitalism?”

Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 3–September 10, 2007.

* The photographs of three of the large works completed in 2006 are captioned “Shown installed at Pickhan Umformtechnik GmbH, Siegen, Germany.” Kynaston McShine’s three pages of acknowledgments include thanks to Pickhan Umformtechnik and Dillinger Hüttenwerke, Dillingen/Saar, for “their professional involvement in the making of the recent work.” The only detailed treatment of the making comes in the thirty-second footnote to Lynne Cooke’s essay on Serra’s sculptures in landscape, quoting a 1994 interview with Serra: “Basically, a forge is a hydraulic hammer which displaces metal under compression. It differs from casting in that in an equal volume, the cast will weigh one-third to one-half less than the forged work of the same measurement....By using a magnesium and carbon steel, I found that its molecular structure, when heated to 1,280 degrees, was cubic. There was something very satisfying about dealing with a cubic structure to make a cube.” Of some outdoor blocks called *Snake Eyes and Boxcars* (1993), he says they “have an archaeological look in that they don’t look like steel, they look like stone. They have a burned quality like meteors or something. That has to do with the fact that we not only forged them but when they were cooling down we flamed them, so that there’s no mill-scale on them.” The “we” in “we flamed them” indicates Serra’s considerable involvement at the foundry level, and his satisfaction in molecular “cubic structure” shows a desire to dominate the process from the atomic level up.

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8.6 KLIMT. *Portrait of a Girl, Head Slightly Turned Left*. Image: Neue Galerie New York.

8.7 KLIMT. *Floating Female Nude in Front of a Dark Background*. Image: Neue Galerie New York.

8.8 KLIMT. *Seated Female Semi-Nude Facing Front*. Image: Neue Galerie New York.

8.9 KLIMT. *Reclining Female Nude Facing Right*. Image: Neue Galerie New York.

8.10 KLIMT. *Female Nude Turned Left*. Photograph by Erich Lessing, courtesy Art Resource, New York.

8.11, KLIMT. *"The Hostile Powers"* (diptych). Photograph by Erich Lessing, courtesy Art Resource, New York.

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A Note About the Author

John Updike was born in 1932, in Shillington, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Harvard College in 1954, and spent a year in Oxford, England, at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. From 1955 to 1957 he was a member of the staff of *The New Yorker*, and after 1957 he lived in Massachusetts. He was the father of four children and the author of more than sixty books, including collections of short stories, poems, and criticism. His novels have won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the American Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Rosenthal Award, and the Howells Medal. A previous collection of essays and reviews, *Hugging the Shore*, received the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism. He died in January 2009.

A Note About the Editor

Christopher Carduff was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1956. Since 1979 he has lived in New York and in New England, and has worked as an editor for Houghton Mifflin, Counterpoint, and David R. Godine, among other book publishers. From 1989 to 1995 he was a member of the staff of *The New Criterion*. He is the editor of John Updike's *Higher Gossip: Essays and Criticism* and of posthumous collections by Maeve Brennan, Penelope Fitzgerald, Daniel Fuchs, and William Maxwell. He is currently an editor for The Library of America, and lives in Melrose, Massachusetts.

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